

Disclaimer: JK Rowling, not me, owns Harry Potter. The only thing I claim is the plot.

A/N: The predecessor to this story, Harry Potter: Mercenary, generated a huge amount of reviews outraged that Dumbledore's crowd won or got away with betraying Harry. Well, your wish is granted and here is the second part of the story.

A lot of people were also outraged with Hermione's character in Mercenary. Personally, I believe it is because they are all lusting after Emma Watson which is completely understandable. However, without Harry and Ron's influence on Hermione I believe she would have developed into an anal-retentive rules monger and authority sycophant that would have appealed to Percy Weasley. If you had an issue with her portrayal in Mercenary you may want to stop reading now.

This story is a little different than its predecessor. Harry has had time to recover from his imprisonment and mature a bit. His anger is not as raw but he still wants a little payback.

Special thanks to everyone on my Yahoo site that submitted comments and corrections as the story developed.

Part I – The Recruitment

They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.

Andy Warhol (1928 - 1987), The Philosophy of Andy Warhol

Outside Las Vegas - 5 August 2002

The bolt of magical energy flew over my left shoulder to splash harmlessly against the outcropping of rock 10 metres behind me. I roll in the sand to my right, ignoring the small jabs of pain from the small rocks as I concentrate on the wizard in front of me. I snap of a couple of quick Bludgeoning Hexes followed by a pair of Stunners trying to take this little bastard down quick without hurting him.

Unfortunately, the bright purple bolts of light tell me my prey doesn't have the same level of regard for my health and wellbeing. Fine, if that's the way he wants to play it.

Two minutes later I am standing over the unconscious form of Ryan MacDonald, a Yank wizard from Oxnard, California. This makes the tenth professional bounty I've picked up. It would have been fifteen but that damn Korean and his insane Texan partner are great trackers.

MacDonald had a 12,000 Galleon joint bounty on his head from the American Department of Magic and Mexican Ministry of Magic. The sick bastard has been kidnapping pretty young Muggle women in both countries, Obliviating their memories of their own life histories and selling them to some rich old Muggle perverts. The Muggle authorities thought the girls were brainwashed with 'mind-control drugs' but couldn't find any traces in the girls' systems. It was only when a FBI agent mentioned the bizarre case over lunch to a colleague from the Magical Investigation Bureau that a magical element was considered.

MacDonald fled having been tipped off by a client with ties to the LEO's. Rumour had him hiding in Rio de Janeiro or Buenos Aires. That drew off most of the competition. I found him hiding out at a former Salem Institute roommate's apartment in the magical section of Vegas. Turned out his old friend was an early investor in MacDonald's scheme.

As I transfigure my captive into an action figure, a part of me wonders why I got myself back into this type of situation. I'd sworn off my saving people thing and was going to live a nice normal life of idleness and some pleasant companionship.

Oh, I remember what it was now.

I was bored.

-HP:HW-

Daphne and I spent a bit over a year simply cruising the Caribbean and the South Pacific in my sailboat. The first ten months was absolute bliss. Daphne and I sailed, partied, and slept through dozens of islands and a couple thousand miles. Okay, so we really didn't sleep that much, but we were in the bunk enough that it should count. (If the boat's a rock 'en, don't come a knocken'!)

We parted ways fifteen months after I shuffled Tommy off this mortal coil. Daphne wanted the high life; the grand parties and fame that came with being a celebrity and/or rich. That just wasn't my thing. I really didn't want to attract Dumbledore's attention to the fact I was not a 'guest' of the ICW prison he'd tried to send me to as a "Dark" Wizard. Fancy dress, manners and I have never gotten on. I much prefer simple parties for two on a secluded beach.

Daphne left the island kingdom of Tonga aboard the monstrous yacht of a Muggle-born Wizard that was heir to "Old Family" money. Ironical that the Pureblood Slytherin Ice Princess hooked up with a snooty, condescending, Blue Blood Muggle-born who had almost completely left the magical world.

Ah, Justin will treat her alright. He was a Puff after all. But the little ponce always set my teeth on edge all through school. He didn't recognize me in disguise and Daph was still enough of an Unspeakable that she wouldn't tell. Instead she told him I was her cousin from Canada. Yep, I saw the writing on the wall with that introduction.

I found several young ladies to help console me during the several stages as I sailed the newly re-christened 'Moonlight' back towards the BVI. With Harry Potter "safely" locked up in the ICW's prison, Dumbledore had no reason to even try to keep my island under surveillance even if he did find a loop-hole in our contract.

Dobby was happy to be back home with a bigger place to clean and Hedwig happily decimated the vermin population that had built up while on our voyage. I puttered around a bit, did some diving and such, but I wasn't really living.

Then a French witch escaped from the same prison that was reportedly holding me. She had seduced several wizards into taking her home where she bound them and drained their blood for use in dark rituals to give her a Veela-like ability to compel men to do her bidding. The French Aurors stopped her before she completed her sixth of the seven required rituals although not soon enough to spare victim number six.

With typical Potter luck, I wandered into the middle of the fight as Marie Gastone took down the last of the five witch Auror team sent to capture her. In the dark she assumed I was also an Auror and

attacked me. We fought for fifteen minutes. I felt so alive for the first time in months!

When the fallen Auror team's backup arrived, I had Gastone disarmed and stuck to the wall using a Parseltongue coded version of the Permanent Sticking Charm and was using healing charms on the two Auror witches still alive. (You needed to say the release word in Parseltongue. Magical cancelling charms wouldn't do any good.)

The leader of the back-up squad approached me with her wand out. "Identify yourself."

During the summer after Second year, all of my school things had been locked away by my loving family. For amusement I started to play little word games after what Tom "I want my name to be an anagram" Riddle had showed me. Since Harry Potter was now supposedly a resident of the ICW Siberian Magical Holding Colony, I couldn't live under my real name. Then I changed it again after Daphne left.

"Tom Aspheart. I found this one killing of these women and then she attacked me. We fought for a bit when I got her with a Stunner. I was just wondering what to do with her when you all showed up."

I felt the Auror trying to use Legilimency on me as she asked, "What is your full name?"

I simply smiled back. "Tom Jerry Aspheart, but you can just call me Tom. My parents gave me two first names for some reason. I think they saw too many Muggle cartoons."

HP:HW

That was the start of the career of Tom "Snake" Aspheart, independent Hit Wizard. Imagine my surprise when rather than trying to arrest me, the French Aurors actually gave me credit for the capture. The Veritaserum-fueled statements from Gastone helped a lot but British Aurors would probably just have thrown me into Azkaban before doing anything that practical.

It was a little over a month later that an owl arrived bearing a cheque for 5,000 Galleons for Gastone's capture and saving the lives of the

two Aurors that survived the fight. Two weeks after that I started to receive regular owls bearing wanted notices for various magical criminals, budding Dark Lords, and other 'persons of interest'. The irony of taking bounties and working with LEO's in capturing dangerous wizards was not lost on me.

I don't know that it was really the 'saving people thing'. Instead I think it was the adrenaline junkie thing. All my life I wanted to be normal- to be completely normal. I wanted to be treated just like everyone else.

What I really wanted was anonymity.

Sitting around the beach with nothing to do but seduce co-eds on vacation is a lot of fun. (A whole lot of fun to be honest.) but after a while the thrill of the hunt seems to fade. So I started taking the bounties all over the world. I avoided Britain, but I did take bounties in Ireland and France. Soon "Snake" Aspheart established a reputation for working alone and successfully facing some of the Darkest Wizards still running free.

-HP:HW-

The Black Suits of the MIB (Magical Investigation Bureau) laugh as I hand them the action figure form of MacDonald.

"Damn Snake, I wish we could hire you to work for us. We've been all over looking for this asshole."

I grin at the senior agent. "Sorry TJ. Management and I would just not get along."

TJ snorts in agreement as he hands me a Gringotts draft. "Well here is your take."

"You already had it ready for me? Wow, TJ. I'm touched by your confidence."

"Nah," the MIB agent grins. "With both you and the Korean competing for it we knew it was only a matter of time. Although I did win 50 Galleons in the office pool thanks to you."

"Always glad to help."

TJ grinned. I always liked the American agent. He kind of reminded me of a cross between Sirius and Kingsley- very capable but with a good sense of humour. Shacklebolt may have been one of Dumbledore's toadies but he was an excellent Auror. Even Tommy's Bum Buddies respected him for that.

"Take it easy, Snake."

I Apparate back to Vegas 12,000 Galleons richer then I'd been this morning. Not bad for three weeks of work. I hit the shower and throw on some clean clothes. They say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. I am curious to see if there is any truth in advertising.

-HP:HW-

So far I've dropped \$10,000 or 1,000 Galleons between the craps and blackjack tables. Winning is not my intent tonight. I've got a free drink in my hand and three hotties in low-cut slinky dresses hovering around. Apparently being able to laugh off a \$10,000 loss is like a mating call to gold-diggers. (I wonder if they've been possessed by niffers?) One of my fellow high rollers mentioned the three girls were starlets from some teen drama I'd never heard of before. It doesn't matter. I so plan on getting lucky tonight.

"Excuse me."

I glance up from my poker cards as a body slips between me and Blonde Starlet #1. As I look up I note the newcomer is female with long beautiful legs that are something of a mocha colour. As my eyes move up I note she is wearing a long silk dress with a slit that goes up a loooong way. An opening in the midriff exposes tight looking abs that give way to a respectable chest. I almost make it to her face when she speaks.

"Don't be such a pervert, Potter."

My eyes leap immediately to her face at that name. It is a face I recognize if you add a few very kind years. I hadn't seen that face since the dinner just before Malfoy, his bookends and I had our little disagreement. Based on the expression and the intelligence in the eyes it is an easy conclusion.

"Hey Padma. Fancy seeing you here. And what brings you out here to the bright lights of Vegas?

The Indian beauty gives me a look of distaste. "You. Scrimgeour sent me."

-HP:HW-

My starlets are most disappointed as I say my goodbyes. I guess they had plans for the night too.

I lead my former classmate up to the room the hotel "comped" me. Lose over \$10,000 and you get a free suite with free meals and drinks. After all, they want you to keep coming back- and losing. The silk sheets and massive hot tub are more than enough motivation for me.

I move over to the wet bar. "Working for Rufus now, Padma? I thought you were all set to get your Mastery in Spellcrafting. What happened?" I lift a bottle of a very good red wine. "Care for a glass?"

The Indian witch frowns at me and ignores the offer. I shrug and pour myself a glass.

Padma settles onto the white leather couch with her legs swept to the left and crossed at the ankles. Combined with that dress it's an interesting combination of innocence and sexy. In a cool voice, Padma answers, "I received my Mastery last year. I was hired into the research group of the Department of Mysteries."

"Nice. It seems the DOM recruited our class heavily." I give her a little leer. "At least the hot ones."

"And where would Ms. Greengrass be?" Padma asked. "She has failed to respond to any of the Department's communications."

I give a nonchalant shrug as I leave the bar. Settling into the chair directly across from my guest I answer, "Last time I saw her she was sailing away draped across her new stud-muffin."

"She left you?" Padma yelps in surprise. It was her first real reaction since coming here. It actually reminds me more of her sister than the Ravenclaw. But who knows? It is always the quiet ones.

"We ran into Justin on his family's yacht. She decided she liked the life on board a 250 foot power yacht complete with a crew and wait staff better than my sailboat."

Padma looks a bit pale now. "Justin Finch-Fletchly knows you are free?"

I frown mockingly at the witch. "Nope, I wore glamours. Thinks I was Daphne's Canadian cousin." Padma calms a bit and nods.

She draws a calming breath (that does wonderful things to the dress) and says, "Then-Minister Scrimgeour sent me to call you home to follow the retainer given for the job specified. Before he left office, he voided the Ministry's portion of the contract you signed."

A small smile crosses her face. "Nice job emptying out the vaults before the contract took effect. Percy Weasley crowed to the papers after you were hauled off how huge tax cuts were coming because of the pending confiscation of the Potter-Black fortunes. When the money was gone, Ron Weasley, aided by his wife Cho, let out the rumour that Dumbledore and Percy Weasley embezzled it all."

I had to snicker at that. That was very Slytherin of Ron. Of course he would try to kill me if I ever told him that.

"Then-Minister?" I ask.

"Just after I left, the Minister was forced to resign and Weasley was installed as Minister. His wife is now his Senior Undersecretary." Hmm, I guess she really did like working under him. See, it's the quiet ones.

"Dumbledore is now running Britain as his own personal fiefdom with his own agenda. Shacklebolt is Director of DMLE. His other cronies from the Order are now in place over all of the other departments except the Department of Mysteries. They are trying to roll that into Hermione's responsibilities.

"The Wizengamot is about to get similarly stripped. Dumbledore got the stupid bastards to sign a law stating that if a family member of a Wizengamot member is convicted of a felony, the family shall be stripped of their seat. They were all thinking immediate family

member, but the law just said family member. With the Purebloods being so interconnected it is very hard not to find a skeleton in the family's recent closet. And since Shacklebolt controls who gets investigated..."

Even I am shocked at that. Stupid bastards. No wonder Tommy was able to make them dance to his tune. I have no idea how the magical race has survived this long. Darwinism should have killed off all the stupid Pureblood wizards by now. Oh wait. That would be almost all of them.

"What is Dumbledore's agenda?"

The frown that crosses Padma's face is a rather sexy pout. "Most of it is stuff that sounds good on the surface: equal rights for Muggle-born, house-elf rights, and equal opportunity for all magical creatures. The problem is they are not making Muggle-born equal by increasing their rights but by decreasing the rights of Pure-blood and Half-blood witches and wizards. They passed a law last week requiring all marriage contracts to be evaluated for proper compatibility. If you read between the lines contracts between traditionally 'Dark' families or other politically unacceptable matches will not be approved.

"Also families with house-elves must allow Ministry observation to ensure the elves are being treated properly. I'm all for fair treatment of the poor creatures, but that means the Ministry can be watching you in your house at any time without any notice. The reports I've read say that several families have already thrown their elves out or even killed them."

I don't like that. I will have to ask Dobby to look into it. Maybe I can have him gather up the homeless elves and offer them shelter. The Ministry already wants me in prison for life. What more can they do to me?

Padma continued, "Have you ever read '1984'? They are pushing complete Ministry control of people's lives for the 'Greater Good'. They've been pushing this agenda since you left. It is subtle. Like Germany in the early 1930's, but you can see where they are headed.

I set that aside for now. "And now you want me to do what?"

Padma gives me a look with a raised eyebrow. It screams 'are you kidding?' It looks cute on her.

"We need them out of power and destroyed. They should be so discredited that even their own grandchildren would deny knowing them."

I blink at the sudden vehemence coming from the woman's mouth. The look in her eyes would make me run back to my island if it was directed at me. I wonder what they had done to frost her muffins. (Not that I would mind that...)

"So, what do I get out of this?" I ask.

"The Minister's last act was to sign a formal pardon for any crimes you may have committed up to that point. It also rescinds the exile and returns any property seized as a result of that action."

I shrugged. It wasn't much and I had no real desire to return to the land of the sheeple.

Padma adds, "Besides, do you really want them to think that they beat you? Wouldn't revenge be a moral imperative to you?"

Now THAT is a good argument. I wonder if she watched Real Genius too? Let's see.

"Tell me, Padma, do you ever dream the I am naked standing on a pyramid wearing sun god robes while you and a lot of other naked girls throw pickles at me?"

The Indian witch looks disgusted at the idea. "NO!"

"Too bad. Why is it I am the only one to have that dream? Okay, I'll do it."

Padma looks surprised by my sudden agreement. "Thank you."

"I won't kill anyone but I do want them to see me coming," I tell her. Before she can disagree, I add, "It's the Gryffindor thing to do. Besides, I want them to know exactly why all of this is happening."

I give Padma my most charming smile. "Now that the business is out of the way, how would you like for me to make up for the horrible time you had at the Yule Ball our Fourth Year?"

"You took my sister, not me."

"True, but you are here and she isn't. And as bad as I was, I am sure Ron was worse."

Padma gives me a small smile. "Actually, he apologized with flowers not long after he hooked up with Cho. So he is ahead of you." I almost laugh at the mental image.

Standing, I take her hand. "Well, allow me to make up for my tardiness, my lady."

Padma's blushes are sexy too. And I was right, it really is the quiet ones you need to watch out for.

Part II – First Strikes

We thought, because we had power, we had wisdom.

Stephen Vincent Benet (1898 - 1943), Litany for Dictatorships, 1935

Diagon Alley - 10 September 2002

The crowd filled the large square in the centre of Diagon Alley. This was the traditional location for wizarding politicians to address the witches and wizards of Britain. Staff from the Office of Magical Protocol erected the stage and installed a podium complete with a built-in Sonorous Charm. Banners and bunting hung from lampposts and buildings all around the square. Everything had to be perfect for Minister Weasley's first formal address.

Percy Weasley mounted the stairs with a sense of destiny and anticipation. His whole life was built for this moment. All of his time, energy and focus was centred on this one goal. A glance over his shoulder confirmed the presence of his wife and partner, Hermione Weasley. A small smile of triumph crossed his face.

He had first noticed the bushy haired woman as a friend of his disappointing youngest brother and the future dark wizard Potter.

She had tried to be a good influence on them both by pushing them to study and follow the rules. The rules were there for a reason. Without rules you would have anarchy and with anarchy comes chaos and evil. Even if some unfortunate instances occurred the rules must be followed! Hermione understood that instinctively.

When the young woman was assigned to assist him in writing Potter's contract, Percy had been a little leery. After all, she had sided with Potter right up to his crimes were revealed. But she had been firm in her support of Professor Dumbledore and now that the Professor and the Ministry had resolved their differences Percy had been delighted to find a kindred spirit. Their relationship grew from that common respect for rules and authority. And now Percy did not know how he ever managed without this brilliant woman's support and wisdom.

Following Hermione were the leaders of the Wizengamot including Professor Dumbledore and also the heads of the significant Ministry departments. It would make for a crowded stage but the display of unity was important for the common people to see.

Members of the press started to shout their questions as soon as the Minister mounted the stage. Percy waited until all of the dignitaries on stage were seated or standing in their assigned positions. He opened his mouth to speak when a sudden voice interrupted him.

It was a squeaky, high-pitched man's voice. It had the tone that almost screamed homosexual. Not that Percy Weasley had any problems with that. It was a life choice but not one he would make. He would never say anything against that choice. (At least not where the public could hear.)

"Candy-gram! Candy-gram for Minister Weatherby!"

To Percy's stunned amazement a small black man in a black tight fitting delivery uniform slipped through the crowd and right past the Auror guards surrounding the stage. The guards seemed too stunned to move as the man confidently strode right up the stairs to stand next to the Minister himself.

"Candy-gram! Candy-gram for Minister Weatherby!"

Percy's face started to turn red at that name. "That is Weasley, not Weatherby!"

The man didn't seem concerned. "Sorry." He pulled a small box from under his arm. "Your candy-gram, Mr. Weatherby. Just sign here.

Percy just wanted the man gone so he could get on with his speech. "Fine." Percy signed the paper while muttering, "It is Weasley, not Weatherby."

The man took the signed paper and said, "Thank you and enjoy your candy." The delivery man turned and left the same way he came leaving most of the people staring after him in astonishment.

Percy looked down at the box and noticed a small tag. It read:

To Minister Weatherby:

Congratulations in achieving your dreams.

The Hogwarts Head-Boy Association

Percy smiled at the recognition of his peers.

"Go ahead and have one, Minister!" a voice called from the press box.

Percy looked up still with a smile from the thoughtfulness of the gift. "Yes, I think I will."

Pulling the ribbon off, Percy opened the box.

The air flowing into the box triggered a rune inside to release the spells cast on the contents of the box. Six metric tons of the highest quality cow manure exploded out of the box covering the entire stage under a foot or more of shit. None of the dignitaries on the stage escaped getting covered. The sudden additional weight caused the whole stage to collapse. The sudden drop caused all of the dignitaries that remained on their feet to fall into the manure.

The audience was stunned but then a couple people started to laugh at the bizarre scene in front of them. Percy and the others scrambled to get up and away from the stench that was now

covering them. Soon the entire crowd was roaring at the zany scene in front of them. They particularly thought it was funny when the Minister knocked his Senior-Undersecretary face first into the smelly muck before managing to fall back down himself with his face landing directly in her arse. That picture along with Dumbledore with a beard dripping shit would be the cover of the next Daily Prophet.

Things were just settling down when an image suddenly appeared floating above the crowd. It was a giant head that was instantly identifiable. The giant lightning bolt scar, brilliant green eyes, and messy black hair gave it away. Then it spoke as loud as a Molly Weasley Howler.

"HEY WEATHERBY! CONGRATS ON THE NEW JOB! HOPE YOU LIKED MY LITTLE GIFT. I GAVE YOU TWICE AS MUCH SHIT AS I GAVE THE MALFOYS!

Standing at the foot of the stage with manure dripping off, Percy Weasley said the first thing that came to mind. "Oh, crap."

-HP:HW-

Cardiff - 11 September 2002

I am sitting in a room at the Park Plaza Hotel in Cardiff. There is a small magical alley nearby catering to the Welsh magical population. I figure by now Dumbledore and company know where I stayed the last time and London will be heavily watched.

I pick up the morning's Daily Prophet. Apparently, they are not yet completely under the Dumbledore-Weasley thumb.

Minister Weasley's First Address full of crap!

The Return of Harry Potter: Where has he been and what does he want now?

The front page is dominated by a cycling loop of Percy knocking Hermione face first into the shit while trying to keep his own balance and then losing it and face planting into her shit-covered bum. The other picture was Dumbledore trying to wring out his beard while looking furious. I almost cry from laughing so hard.

A small blurb at the bottom contains the letter I sent to the Prophet and the Quibbler.

Hi Magical Britain! I'm back!

Dumbledore and his merry band of followers sent me off on a short vacation. Well I came home to find they were sucking all the fun out of life. So I decided to liven things up for you!

I don't want power, fear or death. No plans to take over the Ministry or destroy wizarding Britain. Just think of me as your very own Peeves!

Pretentious gits beware! The Son of the Marauders is coming for you!

Sincerely yours,

The Prank Lord Potter

Think they will get the message? It actually serves two purposes. One is to make Dumbledore and company nervous. They know exactly who and what is coming in their way. The second is no one outside of Britain will take this very seriously. How could the Supreme Mugwump go to the ICW for assistance against a self-proclaimed prankster? He would be laughed out of the Assembly.

I notice there is no mention of my other prank. I wonder if it has been discovered yet?

-HP:HW-

The night prior

Wards are wonderful things. Once you find the key, you can slip through them like they weren't even there. The Hogwarts wards are keyed to the idea of intent on doing harm to the school or the student body. If you don't have the intent when you cross the wards then they let you pass.

Slipping onto the Hogwarts grounds is simplicity in itself. Look at all of the people that slipped in just while I was at school: Padfoot, Wormtail, Crouch Jr., and dementors. Padfoot never intended to hurt

the school or students (although he did). Padfoot wasn't a student so the dementors could cross with the intent to Kiss him. I was merely an opportunity.

I land easily on top of the Astronomy Tower. It is late enough that the tower is empty as even the Prefects have gone to bed.

Sneaking around Hogwarts brings back old memories particularly my early years. It was all an adventure and it was fun. Now with no Snape it doesn't even seem a challenge. I think I am somewhat disappointed.

Some moaning from a closet I pass tells me I was wrong in everyone being in bed. A silent spell transfigures the door into one-way glass. The young couple inside seem to be rather involved. I chuckle when I notice her robes are trimmed in Slytherin colours with the Head Girl badge while his is trimmed in Gryffindor. Hmmm. She seems to be living up to her position's title.

Although I am tempted to use it for a prank the two have done nothing to me. I'll leave them alone.

er...

Okay, just a little one.

I leave them with magical tattoos on their foreheads. His read, "My other ride is a Slytherin" while hers announced her love of Gryffindor broomsticks. Think anyone will make the connection?

I arrive in my destination, the Hogwarts Holy of Holies; Madam Pince's pride and joy; Hermione Weasley's favourite refuge: the library

This idea came to me when I was in my Fourth year and it was all thanks to Hagrid. I was bored working on my Care of Magical Creatures essay and started thinking about my text from the previous year. What charms had been cast on the Monster Book of Monsters to make it so vicious? Could it be done on other books?

It takes six charms to complete my prank. The hardest thing is pumping out the power to cover the entire collection. The fun thing is the books will now 'infect' other books they come into contact with.

The effect will take a day to activate. Hopefully that would give plenty of time to spread the infection.

-HP:HW-

Hogwarts - 12 September 2002

Seventh year Gryffindor Alex Wood smiled as he read the Prophet's report of Minister Weasley's big event at breakfast. Alex was a First year when Harry Potter was dragged away by the Aurors. Alex had grown up hearing stories of Harry Potter. Not the Boy-Who-Lived stuff, but the stories of the youngest Seeker in recent history. Cousin Oliver loved to tell the story of Harry catching the Snitch in his mouth or the seeker-killer Bludgers. Alex wanted to be a Seeker and looked forward to learning from the best.

Alex never believed the charges against Harry were just and was loud in his support of his idol. He was so loud in fact that Ron Weasley gave him Harry's Firebolt to use his Second year when Alex won Harry's position on the team. Alex felt every match he flew was in his hero's honour.

Now his hero was back and seemed out to embarrass and humiliate the people that turned on him. It was...

Alex's thoughts were derailed by the feeling of a cold, slimy tongue on his leg just above the sock. "Ahhh!" Alex jumped up off the bench and looked under the table. The only thing there was his bag. But then the bag moved. His wand in hand, he carefully opened the bag.

The bag suddenly burst open as his Defence and Charms texts made a break for freedom.

Wait, what?

The books now had stick thin arms and legs and a set of eyes popping out of the spine. They were running hand in hand down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. Alex watched in slack-jawed amazement as more books joined them. A whole swarm emerged from under the Brainy table.

Shouts distracted Alex from the Slytherin table. Alex snorted at the sight of most of the Slytherin students standing on their table as their

books tried to attack them. The books leapt up trying to bit the students like some old witch's pack of maddened Chihuahuas. They even made that annoying barking noise.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?" Dumbledore roared from his place at the Head Table. Even with the chaos all around him, Alex snickered as he noticed the old wizard's skin had been scrubbed pink.

Before anyone could answer, Madam Pince tore into the Great Hall like a troll was chasing her.

"Headmaster! You have to come quick! It's a madhouse. All of my precious books are running around chasing people! They are running in packs by subject!" Dumbledore paled at that information.

-HP:HW-

By noon a little bit of order had begun to emerge in the school. But only a little.

All of the classes had been cancelled as the books were corralled. It was Hagrid that discovered the secret to dealing with the marauding books.

The gentle half-giant wandered into the Great Hall holding a few books that lay in his arms calmly. A couple more gnawed playfully at his legs.

"Hagrid, how did you get them to calm down?" Professor Flitwick asked. The morning had been hard on the Charms professor as he tried to remove the spells.

Hagrid set down the books onto the table. He reached down with a smile to pick up one of the books gnawing on his leg. Stroking the spine, he said, "You just have to treat 'em right, prof'ssor. Why, they are cute little buggers too."

Flitwick's eyes bulged. "That is all we have to do to break the charms?"

"It don't break 'em," Hagrid disagreed. "It just calms them so they will let you read 'em."

By dinner almost all of the books were gathered and settled down. The exceptions were some of the books from the Restricted Section that were particularly Dark in nature. One Ravenclaw boy reported a book that latched onto his head and tried to drain the knowledge out of him. It was also discovered that mistreating a book by throwing it or bending a page back resulted in not just that book reactivating and looking for revenge, but all of the other ones in the area too.

Who knew books were pack animals?

Dumbledore was just standing up to address the students when a sudden fanfare was heard throughout the school. A banner appeared hanging above the main door to the Hall. As it unrolled, Alex Wood and a fair percentage of the rest of the student body started laughing.

Treat your books right or pay the price!

Today's free day provided to you by:

Prank Lord Potter

The students celebrated as most of the staff groaned. Everyone had assumed that the prank was Harry's work but to have it confirmed that he had not only pulled the prank but had to have entered Hogwarts to do it made them highly nervous.

Well, for all of them except for Professor Flitwick and Hagrid. The short Charms Master clapped his hands delightedly and wondered what other wonderful magic he would see his former student create. Hagrid simply knew Harry wouldn't turn Dark and the book-monsters were cute.

Part III – Family

Without friends no one would choose to live.

Aristotle

London - 15 September 2002

It has been a busy couple of days since my debut at Percy's first press conference. A Muggle-Attraction Charm on the Muggle-side of the Leaky Cauldron ensured a booming business as Muggles of every stripe arrived for a meal and a pint. Another trick caused the Floo to eject its travellers 'diagonally' from their intended destination-close enough they could walk there but just far enough to be annoying. Even Dobby had gotten into the act by charming the Bludgers around the country to act as they did my Second year when he was 'protecting' me. The only difference was instead of shattering bones on impact these left a giant Potter Mark on a red field.

Diagon Alley changed a bit since the war ended. The recent rash of pranks aside, the Alley was now a rather calm, cheerful place of business.

A bunch of Tommy's supporters were run out of business when I published Malfoy's confession to the world. They were replaced by new businesses that were run either by 'Light-side' Purebloods or new bloods. The Alley has an air of excitement about it that I hadn't remembered since my stay here after my Second year.

Have you ever thought about the logic of that summer?

One – I had to stay with my aunt and uncle for protection that only the blood wards provided.

Two – Sirius Black, notorious Death Eater and betrayer of my parents escapes the inescapable prison. Everyone believed he was hunting me to avenge his master.

Three – I was just turning thirteen, a minor, and could not use magic out of school

Yet, I was allowed to stay at the Leaky Cauldron and wander to my heart's content with no supervision for several weeks.

Conclusion: I was once again bait. If Sirius wanted me, they wanted me somewhere the old dog could find me and then they could find him. I was a tethered goat.

Ironically, Sirius found me before I left Privet Drive. Things would have been a lot different if I hadn't blown up Aunt Marge that night.

What would have happened if they had simply kicked me out and Sirius approached me that night and told me everything about Wormtail.

Ah well, water under the bridge.

Wearing my glamours and dressed as 'Snake' Aspheart, I am wandering down the Alley. I had a few things to check out and possible a few purchases. The Alley is rather crowded as all the people who avoided shopping during the Back to School rush in August made their purchases.

I stop in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies. They have the new Spitfire model on display. The designer must have been a Muggleborn to use that name. What a great name for a British broom.

I never got my Firebolt back and have been using some of the brooms I 'liberated' from the Death Eater supply dump I destroyed. The Spitfire was only seven percent faster than the Firebolt, but it was the first broom to be equipped with momentum compensating charms. Basically, if you pull a 3G turn you only feel about 1.2G. This means you can pull even tighter turns without getting thrown off your broom. It sounds like cheating to me in Quidditch but I don't plan on playing any games soon.

I can't help the next stop.

Maybe it is the signs proclaiming themselves the 'Official Headquarters for Prank Lord Potter supplies'. Or it could have been the illusionary baboon throwing real treats through the front window to any children passing by. Or it could have been because the real baboons inside were always good for a laugh.

Weasley Wizard Wheezes is filled with some of the most inventive, if rather twisted, magical items ever. The fact these two clowns only pulled three OWLS and never took their NEWTS says a lot about the value of standardized tests. (I never took the NEWTS either but how many people also get to download a Dark Lord's knowledge?)

Rather than a bell jingling as I open the door it opens with an eerie creak and a voice of a film Dracula saying, "Won't you please come in?" Clowns.

George pops out from behind the counter when he sees me enter. Ginny told me the secret to telling the two of them apart. It is not really a conscious thing. It is almost taking in their 'aura'. Fred is a bit brasher and flamboyant. George is a bit more reserved. It cost me two boxes of chocolate frogs for this information. Use it well.

I notice there is only one other person in the shop who seems to be browsing the shelves. A quick glance spots the edge of Auror red robes peeking out from under the plain grey cloak the stranger is wearing.

Merlin, are these supposed to be the best defence the wizarding world has? No wonder Riddle was winning. If his people weren't just as bad it wouldn't have even been a contest.

"Welcome to WWW!" George greets me with a wide smile. "What will be your pleasure today? We have a whole new line of pranks for your friends' more ... intimate moments." George's grin grows a little larger. "We also now have candy-grams that deliver a special surprise!"

"Already? Potter just pulled that prank less than a week ago," I comment. I notice the Auror seems to be paying attention to us now.

"Well, we don't pack them like Harry," George confesses. "Getting that much into a shrunken space with the force to push six tons out is impressive. We have confetti, jelly, and water versions but only about twenty pounds in each box." I have to chuckle at that. No doubt Fitch's replacement would love them.

"Fred Weasley," George introduces himself with a hand out.

I take his hand saying, "Tom Aspheart" The Auror seems to start a bit at the name.

"Any idea what I can help you..." George stops as the Auror walks up to the counter. I notice the Auror is rather young, maybe three or four years older than me. Too young to have really fought against Tommy but he was probably at Hogwarts for my first couple years.

Holding back the grey robe to show the Auror robes underneath the wizard says, "I am Auror Brightherd. What are you here for, bounty

hunter?" I notice George lost his friendly smile as he glared at both of us.

I give a little mocking smile. "Shopping. And the title is independent Hit Wizard."

"Bollocks. You're after Potter. Well, go somewhere else, scum. The professionals will handle this." Wow, this ass must have been a Slytherin to get a sneer like that.

Or maybe ol'Snape was offering private lessons.

George seemed to have enough. "That's enough. I want you both out of my shop. We have nothing to say to either of you. Our partner's business is not for discussion." I'm touched by the loyalty. I am even more impressed when I note at least Fred waiting in the stockroom as support.

I raise my hands in mock surrender. "I was just passing through and wanted to look around. I'll be leaving now."

I make a small show of carefully backing to the door and stepping out before turning my back and leaving. Blowhard... er Brightherd makes a few choice comments that I ignore before turning on an uncooperative George to try to get information. Since I haven't seen the Weasleys to talk to since my short visit to the Burrow George really doesn't have anything to give him.

I finish my shopping and pretend to ignore the Aurors trailing me through the Alley. I Apparate to the docks section of London before flying away in my animagus form. Two Aurors arrive as I wing my way to find a safe place to Apparate back to my hotel in Wales.

-HP:HW-

I have only one thing to say about my new broom. Awesome.

The thing has a top speed like its Muggle fighter plane namesake. And it turns on a bloody dime just by thinking about it. I wonder if I could somehow mount cannons or machine guns on the broom. Wouldn't that be a shock to anyone chasing me in the air?

Humming "Aces High", I push the broom through its paces as I fly low over the countryside. This late at night I am barely a blur unless some Muggle happens to be wearing nightvision goggles. I use a charm I found in Japan that duplicates the effect on a pair of goggles I conjured for the flight.

I come to a stop just below the tops of some trees ringing a small field. I can just see over to a familiar sight: the Weasley family quidditch pitch. In the field below me I recognize the group by the flaming red hair. They seem to be standing around talking and haven't noticed my arrival. Magical lanterns light up what looks like a picnic table that looks filled with a Molly Weasley dinner.

I cast a subtle 'radar' charm. It is a Hit Wizard standard spell that causes a magical 'ping' of all of the magical cores in the area. Less than one percent of the wizarding population is close enough to their magic to sense the ping. Rule of thumb is if you can do wandless magic to any real extent you can feel the small ripple in your core. The ping tells me that three people are hiding in the trees at the edge of the pitch. It could be Aurors or just the Weasleys using Constant Vigilance. Just have to be careful myself. I throw a proximity ward around the property in case of any unexpected visitors.

I slowly fly around the field until I am not far from one of the hidden people. I let the broom sink slowly down until I spot the hidden person. Looks like Neville. Sometimes the classics are the best.

"Perfectus Totalis" Neville falls over like a statue.

I land next to him. I roll him over and give him an impish grin. "Hey, Nev. Seems like old times. Glad to see you're all taking Moody's advice, even if he is Dumbledore's lapdog." I pretend to consider. "Now speaking of Moody, should I let you sit there an hour until any Polyjuice wears off?" Neville's eyes are filled with frustration and humour. I'd seen that look a lot in my five and a half years rooming with the bloke.

"Ah, I know. Let's take you to see the wife and family!" Now the eyes are filled with panic. I can understand panic when you are helpless with Fred and George in the area.

I repeat my little ambush two more times picking up Cho and, surprisingly, Katie. It seems that put most of the non-Weasley born on guard duty. Makes sense if someone is counting redheads.

I walk out of the trees from near Neville's hiding place. He and the girls float lazily behind me.

"Neville? Is something wrong?" Ginny calls out to me.

"Nothing a big kiss won't fix, Gin-gin," I answer as I step into the light. "Let's make hubby jealous."

"HARRY!" the assembled family yells in surprise.

"Who else were you expecting?"

I am swarmed in a Weasley hug. Molly was bad enough but the rest of the clan took lessons from her and having them all at once? I'm lucky I still have ribs. All the living Weasley siblings are here except for Percy, who neither side considers to be a true Weasley anymore.

Ginny was the first to notice her husband floating along in statue mode. "Damnit Harry. What did you do to my husband?" That is when Ron, Fred, and George noticed Cho and Katie. They look like they want to laugh but are too afraid to let it out.

"It was in remembrance for our First year and it would have been rude to not let Cho and Katie to join in." I nonchalantly wave my wand to release the curses.

"Bloody hell, Harry, I hated that the first time!" Neville protested. He seems a bit mollified when Ginny goes over and makes a fuss over him.

Fred and George drop to their knees and start bowing, "Oh great Prank Lord Potter! Oh great Prank Lord Potter! We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

I wave imperiously over their heads, "Rise, minions."

The twins stand up with huge grins on their faces. "Damn it is good to see you, Harry!" they said using that 'twin speak' of theirs. It is

annoying enough listening to it let alone writing it. They shared a brain anyway.

"How did you leave that note on the counter?" George asks.

"We thought for sure it was a setup by that Hit Wizard," Fred finishes.

I give them a smile. "Tom's not such a bad guy.

Ron moves in to interrupt. "Why don't we move into someplace a little less open. We are after all standing with the most wanted man in England."

"Hey," I mock protest, "I've been trying to get to all the hotties but I've only been back a week! Give a bloke a bit of time, mate." I duck Ginny's attempt to smack me but Katie catches me. I swear I am seeing stars. Damn, I think the Chaser should have been a Beater.

"We all know you are a perv, Harry. No need to prove it to us," my former Quidditch teammate informs me.

I give my head a shake to clear it. I give her a little smirk. "Oh, and who were the three witches that decided to hold a contest to see which of them could make their new eleven year-old prodigal Seeker blush the hardest?" The Weasleys start laughing as I give a little headshake. "Although I do think the three of you dragging me into the showers with you was a bit too much."

The laughter stops as the group turns shocked looks at Katie as she looks horrified at my comment. "We never did that!" she sputters in indignation.

I pretend to look thoughtful. "Hmm, maybe that was the Claws that did that." Now Cho looks ready to kill me.

Ron steps in before his wife can get started. "As I was saying, let's get us inside before the AK's get cast." Ron being mature and in-charge. Who knew?

Ron hands me a small slip of paper. I glance down and it reads:

"Harry's Haunt is at the Burrow Quidditch pitch."

I glance up in shock as a small, neat cottage appears at the end of the pitch furthest from the Burrow; just behind the goal rings at the tree line.

"What did you do?" I ask in shock. Ginny and Katie each take an arm and pull me forward towards the newly appeared house.

Ron starts to explain, "After what happened the last time you visited, we realized we needed a secure place for you to stay. The Burrow is out because people would wonder why they could no longer remember where we live. Hermione is smart enough to figure it out. She wouldn't remember where it is but they would now we were hiding something."

I have to acknowledge the sense of that. Sirius once mentioned Narcissa and Bellatrix probably assumed he was hiding out at Grimmauld Place but didn't know the Order of the Fried Duck was using it as a headquarters too.

"You can thank the Delacours," Ginny added. "Gabrielle came up with the idea and Fleur cast the charm to hide it. Bill taught her the Fidelius when they were working together."

I said nothing as I observed the cottage we were approaching. It was made of local stone much like the Burrow but all the lines were straight and the stones tight. The roof was made of grey slate tiles. A pair of small windows and a thick-looking oak door was the only things breaking up the stone wall. The overall effect was a traditional English cottage that wouldn't have been out of place in the 14th century.

The door swung open to reveal the gorgeous as always Fleur standing there in a simple dress that she still managed to make look really good. She gave me a big smile and said, "Hello Harry. Surprise."

Then Charlie, who hadn't said anything since his initial greeting, stepped up to the French witch and laid a passionate kiss on her. She appeared to return it enthusiastically.

I blinked and asked, "Do I get to do that too?" Both witches holding my arms slap me on the shoulder. What? It was just a question.

Fleur released Charlie and says, "Sorry, Harry. I love you but only my husband gets to do that."

I have to blink at that statement. Finally, in a plaintive voice I say, "I am getting a migraine."

"Now you know how we feel," chorus Ginny, Katie, Cho, and Fleur.

"Do the twins give lessons in that?" Ron asks.

Fleur gives me a big hug (almost a full scale Molly Weasley) before letting me walk into the cottage.

The inside of the cottage was much larger than it appeared on the outside. It had one large common room that consisted of a large fireplace, a living room area, a fair sized dining table and a kitchen area. It was nicely decorated without getting out of hand. I later learned that it also had two bedrooms and a rather large bathroom complete with a Muggle-style shower stall and a tub large enough to fit four people.

Sitting on the couches by the fire are Gabrielle, looking really good at nineteen, along with a very pregnant Susan Bones. Sleeping on one of the couches is a small, black-haired boy.

"Hi, Harry," Sue waves from the couch.

"That migraine is getting worse," I mutter just loud enough to be heard.

"George, I do believe we have failed to make the proper introductions," Fred commented in a grand tone.

"I do believe you are correct, o' twin of mine," George agreed in the same tone.

Fred wrapped his arm around Katie's waist. "Harry, old boy, please say hello to Mrs. Katie Weasley, George's wife."

George dropped to one knee in front of Sue and bowed, "And this beautiful lady is Mrs. Susan Weasley, Fred's wife and mother of his soon to be son and heir to the Wealsey pranking tradition."

The Weasleys all laugh at the shock on my face. I mean, what the hell happened here while I was gone? It is like a bad Star Trek episode and I am in an evil alternate dimension or something.

I feel a small glass placed into my hand. I glance down at the tumbler of Firewhiskey, then quickly down it in one gulp. I go to hand the glass back and see it was Gabrielle smiling back at me with a look of compassion.

"They give me a migraine too," she confided with a smile. "And I live here most of the time." I can only nod. I can ignore the Veela compulsion, after tossing off an Imperious it is not that big of a deal, but somehow Gabrielle's smile was simultaneously innocent and one of the most sensual looks I've ever seen.

Danger Will Robinson! Danger!

-HP:HW-

"So let me get this straight," I say a short time later. "Charlie married Fleur, Fred married Sue, George married Katie, and then we have Ron and Cho with Ginny and Neville. If I throw the Minister and his Senior Undersecretary into the mix, I just have to ask:

"What the bloody hell happened around here?"

I have been here for ten minutes now and my head really hurts.

Gabrielle took the still sleeping Teddy Lupin into one of the bedrooms and is now sitting next to me on one of the couches. Ginny is sitting on my other side with Neville sitting in a kitchen chair next to her. Fleur is sitting on Charlie's lap in a large, overstuffed reclining chair. Fred and George with their spouses are sitting on the other couch.

"We really didn't have time to catch up the last time you visited," Ginny commented. "Did you think we would just stay with whoever we were dating when you left?"

"Charlie helped me deal with losing William," Fleur interceded. "I was a mess. We never meant for this to happen; it just did."

"Fleur also helped me deal with losing my parents and my older brother," Charlie added. Great now they are making love-y faces at each other. Time to change direction.

"And you four?" I ask the other couch.

"I lost a bet with Angelina and Alicia and had to take Fred on a date," Katie started with a grin. "These two knuckle-heads switched places on me. To my surprise we had a wonderful time and we fell in love. Then he had to come clean about which one he really was. They are both still paying for that."

I have to laugh as the twins take hang dog expressions of guilt.

"And you?" I ask Sue.

"After graduation, I started working in their shop. I was working on my Potions Mastery and they agreed to let me experiment as long as the potions had pranking potential. I woke up the morning after George and Katie's wedding and found Fred in my bed. I decided to keep him after that."

Fred is blushing at his wife's story. I add, "Well, that explains the belly growth." Now they are wearing matching blushes.

I turn now to Gabrielle. "You said you are living here now?" I ask.

The French Veela witch nods. "Since I finished at Beauxbatons last year. I am studying for my Mastery in Spellcreation while watching over little Teddy."

I have to grin at the thought of Remus and Tonks son. "Is he more like his mum or his dad?"

"He is scary smart," Ron commented. "Four years old and he makes me feel stupid." Before they can say anything Ron shoots the twins a glance and adds, "He does the same thing to these two also." Fred and George pause a second before nodding happily.

"He does show some of Tonk's Metamorphamagus skills," Katie added. "But it seems to be merging in an odd way with his father's lycanthropy. I tested his blood and it shows negative for the curse,

but instead of being able to change his body parts to look like a different human, he can change to different animals."

I feel my eyebrows shoot up at that one. "A meta-animagus?" I suggest.

"He can't do a full change," Gabrielle answers, "but he can change his arms and face into an animals."

"He will never need a mask for Halloween," Fred quips.

"One thing you do need to know, Harry," Fleur adds. "Charlie and I now have custody of Teddy until you are able to take him."

"What?" I ask in shock. "Where is Andy?"

"She died not long after you left England the last time. The Healers say it was the result of untreated spell damage from that attack that killed Ted. Personally, I don't think she ever recovered from losing both her husband and daughter in such a short period of time."

The room is silent for a moment.

"Thank you for taking him in," I say. "I know Remus and Tonks would appreciate it."

For the next two hours we just sit and talk. There is a lot of laughter and some tears. They all knew Snape was dead, but they wanted to hear the details. The greasy git's role in the attack on the Burrow and the deaths was known to them all now so there was a bit of vicarious revenge in it.

Eventually it was getting late. Rather than travel back to my hotel in Wales, I fall asleep in the room designated as mine. This place is a lot more secure than any hotel would be. Plus I wanted to see my godson in the morning.

Be careful what you wish for.

-HP:HW-

I wake up the next morning with the face of a warthog staring me in the eyes. From this range I can see the drool dripping from the tusks.

My mind goes from sleep to full out adrenal rush in an instant. Instinctively, I throw my body to the side in an effort to escape.

Unfortunately, I never noticed that I didn't have the weight of a warthog on top of me.

The next thing I know, I am laying on the ground having fallen out of the king-sized bed with a giggling four year-old boy smiling down at me.

"Good morning, Uncle Harry! Auntie Gabby said I could wake you up now!"

I have to grin back at that merry face. I can see a lot of Tonks in that face but in his eyes I can see the mischievous humour of Remus. I'd seen the same sparkle when Padfoot and Moony told me some of the Marauders' adventures when they were in school.

"Good morning, Teddy. Always nice to meet another Marauder."

I guess that was the right answer because now the kid is beaming. He then throws himself down on me to wrap his arms around me.

I've never been around little kids, even when I was one. (Dudley was never 'little'.) While Teddy was an orphan too, he had aunts and uncles galore in the Weasley family in since the passing of his grandmother, Andromeda Tonks. But from what I was told last night, I represented to this kid the same thing Sirius represented to me

And for the first time, I understood how Sirius felt with me.

-HP:HW-

Revenge was not long in coming. My new mini-Marauder sidekick gleefully tells me that his favourite auntie / babysitter was at the Burrow doing yoga with her sister and Ginny. I equip him with several conjured water balloons charmed to be ice cold and to expand after he throws them. I cast a few more charms over the door to the Burrow before sending him in.

The kid is cackling madly as he dashes into the house. There is a moment of silence before I start hearing shrieks coming from the

house. Teddy bolts from the house like Hell Hounds are after him except he has a huge grin on his face.

Gabrielle is the first one out of the house and runs into the sudden storm of small white feathers that appear out of nowhere. Teddy drops to the ground laughing at the dripping wet, feather covered young witch standing there in disbelief.

Personally, I didn't think about what a possible yoga outfit for a nineteen year-old Veela witch might entail. Then make her all wet with feathers clinging to strategic places. My brain is shutting down now. Damn she looks hot.

Fortunately, my accomplice doesn't have the same blood flow issues that I'm having.

"We better get out of here, Uncle Harry," Teddy says. The laughter is gone as he looks at the furious witch. Four year-olds are smart like that.

I grab Teddy and mount my broom in one motion. We take off as Gabrielle rediscovers her voice. Teddy laughs and waves good bye as his Aunts Ginny and Fleur join Auntie Gabby in the doorway.

Part IV - Irony

That's the irony of women in charge, they don't like other women in charge.

Michael R. Perry, House M.D., Deception, 2005

London - 18 September 2002

Thank Merlin I never became an Auror.

So far the two Aurors I am following have busted a teenage witch for shoplifting and eaten a dozen tarts from the various street vendors lining Diagon Alley. They have never even noticed that neither one has their wands anymore or that they now have buttons on their backs reading, 'I love Harry Potter.'

That should be a little embarrassing once they get back to the Ministry. Don't you think?

I leave the Helpless Duo behind as I make my way toward the Leaky Cauldron. I am just sitting down to my lunch when a shadow crosses my table. I figure I am busted as I look up at Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Yes?"

"Tom Aspheart?" the bald Auror asks. I nod an affirmative. "I have been requested to ask you to meet with some of our Ministry representatives."

Personally, I am laughing inside now. Is the Ministry actually inviting their Most Wanted Man in England in for a sit down?

"Is this a business discussion, Auror Shacklebolt?"

Kingsley frowns at me distastefully. "It has been ... suggested to us that you may have the skills required to assist us."

I give the man a little smirk, "And you don't approve of me? Ah, I can live with that so long as the pay is good. Did you want to have a seat or should I meet you there once I finish my lunch?"

Kingsley glares down at me. Buddy, I went to school with Snape as a 'professor'. You're going to have to do a lot better than that to intimidate me.

"The Minister is waiting for you now."

"Well, if you had found me ten minutes ago that wouldn't have been a problem. But I was always taught not to waste food so now you can wait." I can hear the wizard's teeth grinding in frustration.

I take my time as I enjoy Tom's roast beef sandwich. Kingsley and his unnamed sidekick stand a short distance away making no attempt to disguise their impatience. Shack looks like a little kid that really needs to use the loo.

Finally, for them, I stand up and announce I am done. "Great sandwich, Tom! See ya tomorrow." The toothless barkeep gives me a wave as I walk out trailed by the two Aurors.

I am glad today I used Muggle makeup and not a glamour charm for my disguise. The charm is easier but detection charms won't pick up the makeup. We stroll past the square where Percy had his memorable first speech. Kingsley and his partner are now in front of me clearing a path through the crowds.

We enter the Ministry through a doorway just off the square. I find myself entering the same Entrance Hall where Dumbledore and I fought Tom. The Fountain has long since been repaired.

"Kingsley!" a demanding voice calls out. "Where have you been? You were told to be here fifteen minutes ago! The Minister is too busy to be kept waiting! The rest of them have all been assembled." the witch huffs.

"You didn't tell me we were on a deadline, Kingsley old boy," I protest to the Head Auror before Shacklebolt can respond. "Why, if I had known such an important person was waiting for me I wouldn't have let you have us stop for lunch. Shame on you, Auror!"

Kingsley is turning Vernon's shade of purple. I didn't think a dark-skinned person could do that, but somehow he is managing beautifully. I wonder if that vein beating a rhythm on his temple is the sign of an impending aneurism. Here's to hoping!

I turn to the witch. "You have to excuse the Auror, Madam Weasley. When I mentioned I had not yet had lunch, the good man insisted I eat something before coming here to see to the Ministry's business. It is sooo important to maintain a healthy, balanced diet, you know."

Hermione smiles at me condescendingly as she nods her head. I notice Kingsley's vein is now beating out the drum solo from a heavy metal song. That vein is going to pop soon.

"Yes, it is, Mr. Aspheart. If you would follow me, I will take you to the Minister now."

"Of course, Madam. Lead the way, please."

Holy crap. Hermione got a personality transplant with Umbridge. That is just sad.

I follow my former best friend through the Ministry with a growling Shacklebolt trailing behind me. I sure hope he's had his rabies shots. Hermione leads me into a large conference room that is holding several disreputable people and a pair of real arses.

"Ah, there you are, Hermione. Is this the one we've been waiting on?" arse number one, Percy Weasley, asks.

"This is Tom Aspheart," Hermione acknowledges with a dismissive wave in my direction. Not feeling any love here. I'd feel even less if they realized just who they had let in here.

"Go stand over there, Aspheart. We can start now," Percy commands.

I give a little shrug and move over to join the disreputable looking group. I recognize most of them by face and the rest by reputation. With the exception of that damn Korean and his psychopathic partner, they represent the best of the independent Hit Wizard community; my peers. I am greeted by several polite nods and a muttered, "Snake"

"I have gathered you here today to discuss the offered bounty on Harry James Potter," Percy starts in his most condescending tone. "Potter is a threat to the very fabric of our society. He must be stopped and made to pay for the damage he has caused. It is our duty to see this ... man brought to justice."

"Mate, we don't care about that rubbish. Just tell us what the take is and give the informational package so we can get on with our jobs." The speaker is Ian McLean, an Australian Hit Wizard; good with his wand and even better with a beer and the 'Shelias'.

The other arse speaks while Percy turns red. "Very well, Mr. McLean," Dumbledore acknowledges with the familiar 'Twinkle of Doom' in his eyes. "We are offering 10,000 Galleons to anyone that can bring in Mr. Potter discretely. There will be a bonus if you are able to bring him in without alerting either the press or the public of the event."

I am insulted by that amount. I got more for taking that sex slave punk than Percy is offering for me. Cheap bastard.

"So, you want him to quietly disappear," Jason Smith, an American Hit Wizard comments bluntly. "What's the take if we just 'disappear' him for you?" Jason has always preferred the first option in Wanted: Dead or Alive.

Dumbledore takes on a sad, disapproving expression. "That is not how we handle things here in Britain, Mr. Smith. We want him brought to us alive and discretely."

"Quite right, Professor," Percy pompously agrees. "Potter is to be brought to us alive and able to answer our questions. Do you understand this, gentlemen; or should we look for someone else to do this job?"

"Got it. No unauthorized disintegrations," Jason mocks him. The rest of the group snickers at the Star Wars reference.

"Nah, mate," Ian scoffs. "More like Helmut rather than Vader." That one breaks the group up. The Ministry pukes scowl as their hired wands laugh. Sorry, if these guys respected any authority they would have real jobs.

The one Hit Wizard not laughing is a tall, thin, pale, humourless man known as Lurch. No one knows his real name, it is more of a description after the Addams Family character. Lurch simply stares at Hermione with the dead look of an Inferius. I don't blame her for looking rather uncomfortable. Finally, as the laughter dies out, Lurch asks, "Expected targets? Allies?"

Hermione gets the "I know the answer" look that is rather familiar. "Analysis has shown that Potter plans to target people he blames for the Dark path he has taken his life on. This includes many Ministry officials, both past and present, with a focus on the senior leadership. Currently he seems to be focused on a juvenile path of pranks but the Ministry DMLE profilers concluded with a 90 percent probability that he will escalate with increasing violence eventually resulting in mass homicides.

"As for allies, we only expect a small subset of his classmates from Hogwarts would be willing to provide this Dark Lord with any assistance and most of that would obviously be under some form of duress or misguided loyalty to a former school friend."

I can't resist. "So, the three of you are his primary targets and the Minister's entire surviving family are sided with Potter. Is that it in a nut shell?" I managed the question while keeping a straight face. Whoever said I am pants at Occlumency?

Percy is turning a purple with a tinge of Weasley red competing for equal time. Hermione seems close to popping the same blood vessel as Kingsley while Dumbledore's lost the twinkle and is glaring at me.

Apparently oblivious to the Ministry leaders' reaction, Jason comments, "Sounds about right, dude. You've always been good at cutting through the bullshit, Snake." Jason glances around at the rest of the group. "We done here?" he asks. "I am ready for the traditional pre-hunt bar crawl."

The rest of the Hit Wizards respond with a great deal of enthusiasm. Lurch simply nods his acceptance. The man can out drink a fish but he only gets more stony-faced. And people called me a freak. I like him though- he makes a great straight man.

Hermione looks outraged at the group's casual dismissal of the three Ministry leaders. "You don't understand the level of Darkness you are dealing with! Potter is almost a full-blown Dark Lord with the potential to make Voldemort look like a passing rain shower!" I can see she is building up to one of her trademarked rants. Time to go.

"Have your cheques ready for me, lady," Jason says as he gives Hermione a cheeky wave good-bye. The rest of us follow his lead as we leave.

As I follow the group out, I hear Percy comment, "Don't worry, dear. They are only a diversion anyhow." Interesting. I wonder what their game is. I pause for a second.

"Did you have a question, Mr. Aspheart?" Dumbledore asks in genial tones. He seems the only one not on the verge of an apoplexy.

I turn back. "Yes, I do. The British Ministry has always been hard on the independents before. Why are you coming to us now?"

Dumbledore smiles. "Very perceptive, Mr. Aspheart. You seem much more educated than your counterparts. I don't honestly expect your people to have much success in tracking Harry down. But you may go places where we cannot and may flush Mr. Potter from his cover as it were."

I simplify it. "We're your bird dogs."

"That is exactly what you are," Percy snaps. "Hired thugs useful for only blundering around in the dark." He turns on Dumbledore, dismissing me, and asks, "Are you sure about this Albus?"

I take the opportunity to slip out as Hermione joins in the debate.

"So, where is the best pub, Boba?" Ian asks me as I join the waiting Jason, Ian and Lurch. The others have all left. Too many drunken Hit Wizards in one pub is hard on the furniture- and the other clientele. Every society has its elite; the in-crowd. These three make up a third of the top ten independents in the world. I am actually the 'newbie' in their ranks. In sports terms, I am the promising rookie that made a couple big plays in my first few outings in the big leagues.

"Hey, I should be Boba Fett," Jason protests. "I'm the one they said not to kill anything. Snake never kills if he can help it."

Ian shakes his head. "Nah mate. I think you are Bossk. You know the ugly reptile-looking thing that kills everything." Star Wars fans. They put the fan in fanatic.

Jason playfully scowls. "I resemble that remark. Okay, then Lurch is IG-88 and you can be Dengar." Jason turns to me and says, "Lead the way, Boba." These guys have had way too much time on their hands apparently.

"Why am I the guide?" I ask as we walk out of the Ministry.

"If we were in Brisbane, I would be the guide," Ian answered. "But seeing as how you are the local boy, you should know the best spots."

I never mentioned to anyone that I was from England. Tom Aspheart claims the BVI as his home. This is a little troubling.

-HPHW-

We end up in a shady little pub just across from Borgin and Burkes. We order some drinks and sit quietly until they came. Lurch casually pulls his wand and casts a silent Privacy Charm.

"Talk," he grunts while glaring at me.

"About?" I ask trying to buy time. What the hell is going on here?

"About why the hell Harry Potter decided to come out of hiding here of all places," Jason answers just before taking in some of his beer.

"Why ask me?"

"Cut the shite, Potter. We've known who you were since you took your first bounty; the first real one, not that one you stumbled into," Ian says. "A new Hit Wizard comes out of nowhere to take one of the Top Ten list bounties. You can be damn sure we checked that out. I love the anagram too by the way."

I drop the game. "And what do you plan to do about it now?" I tense up as I feel my magic start to build.

"Easy, Snake," Ian say calmly. "We didn't do anything at first because their simply wasn't a bounty out for you. After all, Harry Potter was in some ICW Hellhole somewhere. Now? Professional respect and the fact you could probably take the three of us together in a fair fight."

"Don't fight fair," Lurch comments.

Jason laughs, "Ain't that the truth, man. Now Snake, care to explain what the hell is really going on here?"

I know these guys well enough that they have some contingency plan in place if things go sideways here. I would. I make a snap decision based on instinct to come clean. Over the next hour I talk about my time at Hogwarts, the fight with Draco, Azkaban, the contracts, and defeating Tom. I throw in the contract the Ministry forced me to sign.

"Crap, man. They fed you a shit sandwich," Jason summarizes. "What do you plan now?"

I grin at the trio. "You saw them today. I plan to embarrass, provoke and annoy to an extreme. Eventually they will do something so stupid that the sheeple will kick them out of office with their reputations in tatters."

Ian smirks, "They didn't seem to have much of a sense of humour, that bunch."

"Deal?" Lurch asks.

I think for a moment. "I'll pay you 7,000 each to go through the motions of looking for me while throwing off the other independents. Make a bit of noise and make the Ministry look desperate. An additional 500 every time you do something to embarrass the Ministry that makes it into the media."

"Sounds lucrative," Jason comments. "Might be as good as the bounty on you with the bonuses tied in. Low combat risk and we all get paid. I'm in."

"Works for me, mate," Ian agrees. Lurch merely nods agreement.

"Great," Jason said with an expansive smile. "Now we can get into the serious partying."

I agree by taking a long pull on my drink. I don't need too many more of these surprises. First the Weasleys and my darling godson, and now I find out that the inner core of the Hit Wizard community knew who I was the whole time. I really needed this drink.

-HP:HW-

19 September 2002

Hermione Weasley sat behind her expansive desk and looking across it with an annoyed scowl at the people seated on the other side.

Serving as the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister position was almost the culmination of a lifelong goal. When she first learnt of the

Wizarding World it seemed to be the greatest of dreams. Kids at school always resented her brains and the odd things that always happened around her. To learn that there were others like her- that she was a witch- seemed like a dream come true.

But that didn't last long. Her first trip to Diagon Alley she experienced the prejudice and intolerance of all things Muggle and Muggle-born. Her fellow students were just as bad as the adults. The eleven year-old witch swore that she would make them admit she was just as good as any Pureblood. And now twelve years later she sat one step below the ultimate seat of power in the Wizarding World. And yes, the Minister was a Pureblood, but he was also her husband.

At the end of her Second year, Hermione told Professor Dumbledore of her ambition. He was visiting the students just released from the basilisk's petrification and she was upset about the missed classes. The Headmaster was very understanding and offered his assistance in reaching her dream. That was when he offered her the Time Turners for use in her Third year.

Professor Dumbledore opened a number of doors and opportunities not normally open to a young witch. But he seemed to know everyone. During her Fifth year they talked about her House-elf concerns. That led to the Professor talking about his dreams of a united, just Wizarding World. It sounded wonderful to Hermione. She swore to help him. She owed him so much; how could she do anything else?

The Professor had told her of Harry's importance to the Wizarding World in stopping Voldemort. The old wizard asked for her help in keeping Harry stable and under control. Between the other students, the press, and the nightmares, Harry was horrible to deal with that year. She loved her first real friend as a brother but she could see he was going to a Dark place with his lack of emotional control.

Then that all seemed to change.

Sixth year Harry came back with a powerful, determined attitude. He confided to Ron and Hermione that he felt Dumbledore was taking too passive a stance against Voldemort and Harry wanted to be more pro-active in the fight. Harry was also fixated on Draco Malfoy

as the representation of Voldemort and his Death Eaters at the school.

Hermione tried to get Harry to listen to reason. She even talked Ron into helping her calm Harry. But he was too far down his Dark path. Hermione failed the task Dumbledore gave her when Harry tracked Malfoy and his cronies down and murdered them. At first she felt it might have been an accident, but eventually she realized he had gone after them with intent to start a fight. Legally, it was at least second-degree murder.

Then Dumbledore had told her that not all was lost. The great wizard had a back-up plan to get Harry trained and pointed at the Dark Lord. Hermione was initially horrified by the thought of Harry going to Azkaban with the Dementors but her mentor assured her it was the only way to save the Wizarding World with Harry going Dark.

It really was for the best.

After leaving Hogwarts, the Professor helped her find a job within the DMLE as a junior member of the team that drafted criminal law for approval of the Wizengamot. It was there she found the man just as dedicated to the concept of Rule by Law as she was herself.

Now Hermione scowled out across her desk at her former boss in the DMLE. While Madam Bones raised the witch who was Hermione's sister-in-law, neither woman cared to acknowledge the tie. Hermione knew Bones resented her former subordinate's rapid rise in the Ministry and did her best to undermine the younger witch's authority.

"The decision to use independent Hit Wizards to augment the Aurors was a decision made at the highest level of the Ministry," Hermione explained in a flat tone. "I would think that you would welcome the help. You are always claiming you need more funding for more recruits. Now you have the help."

Bones glared through her monocle. "Bounty hunters are not additional help. They are loose cannons more likely to cause more work for my people than give any help. The last thing we need is some idiot thinking he is an American cowboy starting a duel in the middle of Diagon Alley."

Hermione scowled. Part of that was because tired of the old witch's complaining, but another part was because she shared Bones' concern about controlling the Hit Wizards. They had not seemed at all respectful of the Minister or Professor Dumbledore.

A knock on the door diverted Hermione's attention from the DMLE Head. "Yes, Paula?" she asked her assistant.

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but Head Unspeakable Croaker is here and would like to speak to you."

Hermione wondered if he was here to argue about the soon-to-be made announcement placing his department under her purview.

"Send him in."

A moment later the Unspeakable strode into the room. "We have an issue," he started without preamble.

"What is it?" Hermione demanded.

"A package arrived for you today. The box set off the receiving office Dark Magic Detectors. When they failed to determine the nature of the magic, they called us for a favour. We were able to clear the magic from the box and get it open. Inside was a small doll. It shows no sign of any magic whatsoever, but the curses on the box would have anyone opening the box having some kind of permanent Babbling Curse laid on them. We think it was Potter's attempt to get at you but we can't figure out what the doll is supposed to mean."

Hermione sat back against her chair. She had known Harry would try to take some type of revenge on her. He refused to see that everything she had done was for his own good. Now he was lashing out like a child denied his dessert.

"What was the doll?" Hermione asked after a moment.

Croaker placed a standard evidence bag on her desk. Inside was a stuffed figure of a troll. Someone had placed a mini toilet seat around its neck.

Hermione repressed a small shudder at the memory the stuffed toy brought to her. It also reminded her of the time when her best friend

had been a Light wizard willing to sacrifice his life to save a bushy-haired Know-it-All he didn't even know. What had happened to that boy?

"Yes, it was definitely from Harry. Ronald would not think to send something like this or have the spell knowledge to curse the box as you described."

Croaker merely nodded. "It took three of my best Cursebreakers to get into the box. One of them got hit by something one of our Muggleborn's called a 'Pinocchio' curse. Every time he says something he knows to be untrue his nose grows an inch."

Hermione nodded recognizing the reference from her childhood. "How deadly were the other curses?"

"Nothing deadly," Croaker admitted with a shrug. "Mostly embarrassing prank stuff. One would have made you belch or pass gas every time you used a combination of the words 'Ministry', 'authority', 'respect' or 'responsibility' in a sentence. Juvenile but the spell work was easily at a Mastery level."

Hermione frowned at that last comment. "Potter must have someone working for him. He doesn't have the skills or education to do something like that. Probably Fred and George, but I would have thought that was beyond even them."

"I've tried to recruit them on more than one occasion," Croaker admitted. "But they said they were having more fun on their own and that the Ministry couldn't match their salaries owning their shop." The man shrugged, "They were right about that last part by the way."

The Senior Under-secretary waved away the old irritation of the twins squandering their talents on something like pranks. "Could they be helping Potter?"

Bones made a small expression of distaste. "As per the Minister's orders, the shop is under regular surveillance. They know we are watching but haven't done much more than send the surveillance team take-away from a nearby pub. I can't say definitively but we've seen no signs of it."

"I will say, they have been open and continuous in their support of Mr. Potter," Bones added. "While they do not dispute the events that led to Mr. Potter's arrest, they do take issue with the Ministry's understanding of those events and also Potter's treatment after defeating the Dark Lord." Madam Bones gave Hermione a very direct look. "The last I will admit to find common ground with them."

That comment led to a ten minute argument between the Senior Undersecretary and the Department Head of the DMLE. Croaker looked ready to bolt after the first minute but couldn't find an out. Finally, Hermione threw the pair out of her office.

Once in the hall, the department heads started for their respective areas. Once they were away from the Executive offices, Bones asked, "Anything trip that finely honed instinct of yours that you failed to mention to our resident genius?"

Croaker snickered to hear the reserved and proper Amelia Bones using the derogatory term for the Senior Undersecretary used by the common Ministry workers.

"One thing," the Unspeakable admitted. "The Dark magic Potter used- all of that could have been done with perfectly acceptable magic. It was almost like he was deliberately trying to set off the detectors."

"Distraction?"

"Probably," Croaker hummed. "I have to admit, I can't wait to find out what he has planned. We really went over that toy looking for any sign of magic. Nothing." Croaker shrugged. "So, care to join me for lunch?"

The two senior Ministry officials went on about their business while wondering what Potter was up to now. Neither mentioned the small pack of legal texts that rampaged down the hall past them towards the Senior Undersecretary's office.

-HP:HW-

Left alone in her office, Hermione Weasley ripped the evidence bag off the stuffed troll. She recognized it as the same construction as the Beanie Baby crazy she had heard about from her dentist parents.

They were giving small ones to children that had no cavities on their check-ups.

'Harry must have had this one specially made,' she thought. 'There is no way a Muggle company would include something like this in their normal lineup.'

Hermione smoothed the soft fur lining the troll. It was kind of cute in its ugliness; kind of like a manatee. It was odd but holding the troll was making her feel calmer. It reminded her of a more innocent time.

She never really noticed when she jabbed her finger on a small point in the fur. It felt like the end of a plastic hanger tag used to put labels on clothes and other items.

Nothing to worry about.

But what in Merlin's name was making all that noise outside her office door?

Part V – Lord of Chaos

Chaos in the midst of chaos isn't funny, but chaos in the midst of order is.

Steve Martin

20 September 2002

I recognize the boy flying around the Quidditch pitch and feel a bit of jealousy.

Alex Wood was flying around the Quidditch pitch waiting for the rest of his squad to come down from dinner. It was Alex's sixth year on the team and second as captain. According to Ron, Alex was determined to keep the Quidditch Cup in McGonagall's office. The Seventh year told Ron it had been there since Harry Potter's Third year and that wasn't going to change on his watch.

A sudden bang coming from the school caught the Seeker's attention. He stopped flying to glance over towards the school to see the entire student body pouring out of the doors. They seemed

to be running for no reason the boy could see but as they got a little closer, we could hear they were chanting something.

"Dumbledore! Dumbledore! Dumbledore!"

I watch as Alex's jaw drops open as he watched the huge mass of students and professors running down the path. It seems the only one that wasn't affected was Dumbledore himself. The Headmaster was running after them casting spells trying to stop the crowd. A few dropped stunned but the old wizard had a hard time running after them. Spellcasting is hard when you are out of breath. That was probably the longest workout the old fart's had in decades.

The amazement continued as the crowd turned to head directly towards the lake. Alex was too shocked to react as he watched the entire student body along with most of the staff run right over the cliff and into the cold lake.

Alex shook off the shock and started to fly to their rescue when I stopped him.

"Don't worry. They will be wet and cold but the safety charms will prevent anyone from drowning. At least I didn't send them into the lake in February."

Alex turns in shock to see me floating on a broom just behind and above him on my brand new Spitfire. I could see the shock increase ten-fold as Alex realized just who was floating in the air next to him.

I can't help but to grin at the boy's shocked expression. "If they want to be Dumbledore's lemmings, who am I to say no? Nice broom by the way."

"It—it's yours if you need it back," Alex stammered.

I wave that away. "Ron told me he gave it to you to use and I appreciate what you've done with it. I would appreciate it if you could return it after your season is over. It has some sentimental value to me."

Alex gave me a more natural grin. "Right after I keep the Cup out of Slytherin's hands."

I return his grin with a bit of a smirk. "You had better or Oliver will never let you hear the end of it." Alex groaned and rolled his eyes at the reminder of his Quidditch-insane cousin.

Alex calls up his Gryffindor courage to ask a question. "Why pranks?" At my questioning glance Alex adds, "I've seen pictures from your final fight with Voldemort. You could take Professor Dumbledore in a fight. He doesn't have the stamina anymore for a long fight; especially if you fought him now after running all the way down to the lake. So why all the pranks?"

I am impressed on several levels. Ollie's little cousin was able to use Tom's pseudonym without stammering while talking to someone the Ministry was labelling the new Dark Lord. It could just be he was so young when Tom finally stayed dead but I doubt it. After all, the magical world thought he was gone for ten years when I first got to school and they still refused to call him anything but that hyphenated nonsense. The fact it was a thoughtful question made it even more impressive coming from a Gryffindor.

I answer with a smirk to make a Slytherin proud. "Pranks are fun. I think the Marauders would approve. I know the Weasley twins sure do. Besides, I don't want to kill anyone; just make the pompous old windbag down there and his arse kissers look really bad."

I didn't add my real reason. If I can prank a target, it would have been rather easy to make the prank deadly. Every student below could have been killed if I had wished. Either replacing the potion that created the lemming impulse or by replacing the anti-drowning charms with a whirlpool to suck them down to the bottom of the lake. Dumbledore and the two Weasleys in power knew this and had to respond with stronger defences but that just made them look scared and paranoid in the eyes of the public.

A purple pulse of light flashes past my shoulder. An enraged Albus Dumbledore was approaching the us. I give my old Headmaster a cheeky wave.

"Time to go. Have fun with Slytherin. Maybe I'll make it to the match."

I drop my broom into a dive as I accelerate out of the stadium. I'll admit I am showing off a bit but I figure I have to live up to the hype somehow.

-HP:HW-

Harry dropped the broom into a dive then banked hard once the bleachers obstructed Dumbledore's view. Alex watched as the former Seeker threaded through the stands making for the Forbidden Forest. His successor had heard all about Harry's flying and the new broom's capabilities but he still couldn't believe his eyes.

Alex's attention was then caught by the yelling of an angry professor. Alex allowed the broom to descend down to Dumbledore.

"Mr. Wood, why did you not try to take Mr. Potter into custody? You had a perfect opportunity!" the old wizard ranted.

Alex looked at the Headmaster in disbelief. "You wanted me to start a magical duel while on a broom against the bloke that not only killed Voldemort but is also the best Seeker Hogwarts has ever produced? Professor, are you nuts?"

Dumbledore scowled, "100 points from Gryffindor for failure to show the courage that House is supposed to be known for, Mr. Wood!" Then he turned and started back for the castle.

'Go, Harry,' Alex cheered in his head as he watched the professor stalk away. The rest of his House would understand the loss of points. At least they would once they were warm and dry.

The Seeker flew down to the lake to help the professors getting the rest of the school out of the lake. A long damp line was already starting to make their way back up the hill. Then Alex noticed something that made him laugh.

Attached to the robes of the drenched students was a button that alternated between two statements: "No longer a Dumbledore Lemming: Ask me how!" and "Tell the Minister to go jump in the lake!"

-HP:HW-

Hermione Weasley arrived in her office from the normal 7.30 Department briefing. Trailing behind her was the Head of Research for the Department of Mysteries and his assistant. Today that department would start to transition to her direct control. Croaker would still be the Department Head, but the young Muggleborn witch would provide oversight to the greatest source of new magic creation in the Wizarding World.

To say the Senior Undersecretary was excited would be a severe understatement. This was like getting a free pass to the ultimate Restricted Section.

"So, where shall we start?" she asked pleasantly once her guests were seated.

"I would like to start with a simple breakdown of our projects by section," answered the man known only as Quincy. "Then we can get started on the specifics and an expected return of our major efforts if that is acceptable to you."

"Perfectly. Thank you." Hermione took an offered packet of presentation documents from Quincy's cloaked and silent assistant. The former 'bushy-haired know-it-all of Gryffindor' could barely contain her excitement as she opened to packet to the first page.

It was covered with some undecipherable symbols. Assuming it was some type of DOM header page, she turned to the next page. Same thing.

"What is the meaning of this?" Hermione demanded.

"Pardon me?"

Furious Hermione gestured to the packet. "This rubbish! Where is the information on the DOM projects?"

Quincy looked confused. "Right in front of you madam, just as you requested."

"Is this some type of code? Trying to make me look stupid?"

"May I see your packet?" Quincy asked. Hermione handed it over but all he saw were the charts he and his staff spent the last month preparing. "It looks like normal English to me."

Hermione suddenly paled and pulled a well-worn book from the shelf behind her. She seemed to sway in her chair as she flipped through the book.

"Harry, what did you do to me?" she whispered in her shock.

"Madam Undersecretary?"

Hermione looked up at her nominal subordinate with shock-filled eyes. "Harry got me. I can't read a word. I know every word in this book, every single one, but I can't read a word!" In her anger she slammed her favourite book down on the desk.

To her shock Hogwarts: A History suddenly grew arms and legs and started to screech at her in a high-pitched voice. To make matters worse the other books on her shelves joined in with their comrade. In less than a minute, the room descended into complete chaos.

The cursing of Hermione Weasley spread like wildfire through the Ministry. While her husband, the Minister, tried to calm his distraught wife, Dumbledore led the efforts to counter the curse. Healers pronounced her vision fine and could find no physical cause to her inability to understand the words. A trio of Potions Masters tested her blood but found no trace of any potions save for a birth control potion. (Percy is a Weasley after all – at least genetically)

Several Charms Masters, including Professor Flitwick, and Cursebreakers were also called in. Neither group could find the source of the curse although they did find some odd distortions in her magical aura.

"It is very odd," Flitwick commented in an excited voice. "The curse is very focused but it does not seem to be tied to anything." The little man pondered for a moment. "Actually, the only thing I have seen that is similar is the odd distortion on the Defence classroom that we think is tied to the DADA curse."

"Have you ever tried simply changing classrooms?" a colleague asked.

The Charms Professor laughed, "Oh my yes, we have changed rooms and even the position's title but it seems to be a rather clever curse."

Dumbledore missed the entire last part of the conversation as his mind flashed back four years and Harry's taunts as they waited with Kingsley and Alastor to leave Azkaban.

"Mr. Potter did this."

Dumbledore didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Flitwick chirped, "Of course it was, Albus. Who else is pranking the entire nation?"

Dumbledore waved that away. "You don't understand. Mr. Potter once told me he knew how to end the DADA curse." Seeing the curiosity in short professor's eyes, Dumbledore admitted, "It was the last thing he said before Apparating away when he was released from Azkaban. He must have learned this while in Tom's mind."

Flitwick nodded in understanding. "And he knew taking away Ms. Granger's ability to read would be a great punishment for her, as it would be for most of my Ravenclaws." The man peered up at his taller boss. "I must say, Albus, you have a positive gift for creating enemies. The two most powerful magical students I have ever been associated with have both made your removal a central goal of their life. You wouldn't happen to have a spare prophecy lying around by any chance, would you?"

"I do not find that amusing, Filius."

Flitwick shrugged. "Apparently Mr. Potter does. Well, at least I stayed dry this time."

-HP:HW-

The Ministry was still abuzz later that afternoon over the cursing of the Senior Undersecretary. While some openly enjoyed the bossy young witch's frustration, the rest seemed to be waiting for the other shoe to drop.

They didn't have too long to wait.

A head appeared in the Floo of DMLE Central Dispatch just long enough to shout, "We need reinforcements at the Daily Prophet immediately!"

Thirty seconds later, a fully prepared tactical squad of eight Hit Wizards deployed via the Floo into the main entrance hall of Britain's major wizarding newspaper with wands drawn and spells ready to go. But there was no sign of anything wrong at the Prophet.

The paper's staff all seemed to stop what they were doing in surprise as the team of Ministry Hit Wizards deployed ready for combat. A few of the weaker hearts collapsed or dove for cover at the sudden arrival of the unit.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded a heavy-set wizard they recognized as Herman 'Poppa' Rotzi, publisher and editor of the Daily Prophet.

The team leader motioned for the team to stand down. "We had report of a disturbance here, sir. We were concerned that Potter was attacking here."

The big wizard paled at the mention of Harry. "Why would he come here? What did we ever do to him? We just report the news! It's not our fault if some of our sources have given us bad information!" The entire tactical squad along with some of his own staff gave the publisher looks of disbelief.

The team leader put that aside. "Would you like us to take a look around before we go, sir?"

"Yes," Rotzi agreed. "We must ensure that nothing is done to damage the integrity of the people's information source."

The team leader ignored the pompous arse as he detailed out six of his team members check out the building in pairs. With a final nod to the publisher, the team leader took his final team member off to check the building.

No one noticed a ninth member dressed in an identical uniform make his way through the front doors and down to the basement where the printing presses resided.

-HP:HW-

The next morning British Minister of Magic Percy Weasley made his way down from his bedroom in the official Minister's residence. The ornate house was actually the former manor house of a vanished noble Pureblood family. Percy felt it perfectly suited the importance and majesty of his office.

Percy sat down at the antique table and placed his napkin on his lap. An instant later his normal breakfast appeared along with his tea and the morning paper. Percy looked on in contentment; finally some normality.

Dealing with Hermione's hysterics the previous day was horrible. He did his best to be a good husband but she was inconsolable and he did have important work to complete. Hopefully, the cursebreakers would figure out something soon or they could catch Potter and force him to remove it. For today she would be staying at home under some powerful Calming Draughts.

That horrible brat was trying to destroy everything Percy had worked so long and hard for.

With a sigh, the Minister of Magic took a sip of his tea while picking up the morning paper. A second later a mouthful of tea covered the antique table.

Ministry Clueless on Finding Potter!

DMLE hires Bounty Hunters to Capture Prank Lord!

Potter's Side of the Story: An Interview with the Prank Lord!

Percy shot out of his chair in a rage. How dare the Prophet print such rubbish! He would see them shut down by noon today.

The enraged Weasley apparated out of his house headed for his Ministry office determined to get to the bottom of this. He never noticed the new motto included in the banner at the top of the paper.

The Daily Prophet: We solemnly swear we will never lie!

-HP:HW-

"You don't understand," Daily Prophet publisher Herman Rotzi whined two hours later. "Those weren't the stories that we were supposed to run. The lead story headline was supposed to be, 'Ministry Close to Finding Potter'."

"So, how did this happen?" Percy demanded with a glare.

'Poppa' Rotzi shrugged. "My people think Potter somehow cursed the presses. If we try to print anything the reporter knows isn't true the story changes to what the truth is. It even writes it in the reporters own style."

Anticipating the Minister's next comment, the wizard added, "If the reporter even thinks it might not be true, the story changes to reflect their level of disbelief in their information."

"Use a different press," Percy demanded in a condescending tone.

"Don't tell me my business, Weasley," the publisher shot back. "These presses provide not only the Prophet, but also Teen Witch Weekly, The Quidditch Report, and just about every other major publication in the nation. There is only one other magical press in the country capable of handling the volume to meet our needs."

"So have them print it for you."

Rotzi glared at the ignorant politician. "The owner of the press is that madman, Xeno Lovegood from The Quibbler."

Percy gaped at the man in shock. "Why does the Quibbler have a press that large? That is ridiculous. They only print a few thousand copies per issue."

The large wizard snorted, "Ask your younger brothers. The twins invested in the paper by buying Xeno the new press last year."

Percy resisted the urge to curse the publisher right there. "Fine, I will order that press to be seized as critical to national security. Then you can print the Prophet."

-HP:HW-

It turned out that the Ministry's decision to issue a court order demanding the sharing of the press was completely unnecessary.

"You are welcome to use my press, Herman," Xeno invited as he hung casually from the ceiling via charmed boots. "I've already printed the next three months worth of editions so it is just sitting there."

"You've already printed papers for the next three months?" the rival publisher asked incredulously. "But the information will all be out of date!" The wizard didn't really care about the other paper but it just offended his professional sensibilities.

Xeno shrugged upside-down. "But what else are we supposed to do my dear banana? My star reporter and I are to leave soon to hunt the elusive Pot Bellied Sceetch of Central Asia. The rest of my staff disappears whenever we leave. They are rather lazy but they always come back when we return."

Rotzi felt a migraine coming on. To the best of his knowledge, this lunatic and his equally deranged daughter were the Quibbler's only employees. Giving it up as a bad job, the publisher stalked off to have his people start the run for the next day's edition.

Not that it did any good.

The next morning's headlines proclaimed:

Ministry steals rival's press to print propaganda!

Presses spelled to print only the TRUTH!

Why is the Ministry so scared of Potter?

Ministry-hired Thugs start brawl in Leaky Caldron

-HP:HW-

Percy felt something give in his stomach as he read the headlines. From the slight taste of blood in his mouth, it was time to see his personal Healer for another Ulcer-Care Potion.

The previous day had been horrible as owls bombarded the Ministry with letters and howlers. Some of them he was sure came from his twin brothers. Those howlers spoke in his mother's voice and proclaimed her disappointment in his behaviour.

Now they find out that Potter apparently cursed both presses and they apparently had a Confundus Charm to make the stories look right until they were delivered to the actual subscribers. With these new stories the public was going to get even worse today.

"Have they found a cure yet, Percy?"

Percy looked up to see his beloved wife and partner enter the room. She looked better than the day before although her hair hadn't looked so frazzled since they had been in school together. She looked rather jumpy; like she was holding herself together thru sheer willpower.

"Not yet, dearest. It looks like we will need Potter to lift it. Are you coming into the office today?"

Hermione nodded in the affirmative. "I cannot allow Potter to win. I will have my assistant read me the reports." The young witch picked up the Prophet even though she couldn't read it as she joined her husband at the table.

"Anything interesting in today's paper?"

With a sigh, Percy told his wife about the problems with the Prophet's press being cursed and then nationalizing the Quibbler's press only to find it was cursed the same way.

Hermione looked pensive at the news. Percy asked his wife what she was thinking.

"Harry has something big planned and somehow he is going to pull it off. It will be completely off-the-wall, illogical and should never work. But somehow he'll pull it together and come out smelling like roses. I saw him do it every year I was at school with him. And once he has a goal in his head, nothing is going to divert him."

Hermione smiled sadly at her husband. "It was one of the things I loved about Harry before he went Dark. If he thought he was in the right, nothing was ever going to stop him. It was his willingness to do whatever it takes to win that made me first fear he was going Dark."

"A fear he confirmed when he murdered Draco Malfoy and his friends," Percy added helpfully.

Hermione pushed aside the question of Harry's guilt or innocence to return to the original topic. "The point is Harry has managed to prank both of us while causing chaos at both the Ministry and Hogwarts. That Hit Wizard was right when he said Harry has three primary targets, the two of us and Professor Dumbledore. Since he already has made life miserable for both of us that means he has one target left."

Percy stared at his brilliant wife in sudden dread. Only one thought was going through his head.

'Oh bugger.'

-HP:HW-

Wandering down Diagon Alley openly without any disguise is an odd sensation. I had planned to pull another prank to disrupt the Alley but the people here probably wouldn't notice it.

The Alley is filled with furious people. They are so caught up in their anger it is like I have a Notice-Me-Not Charm on me. I have to laugh at the chaos all around. Two days of getting the truth in the Prophet and the sheep are all set to pull down the Ministry. It is like my Third Year on, only in reverse.

Honestly, it makes me wonder why in Merlin's name anybody wanted to rule these people. Dumbledore, Riddle, Fudge and Weasley – these guys have gone to incredible efforts to control this place. I have no interest in the least in ruling these people. I am just a spanner in their plans.

A small riot is breaking out in front of Madam Malkin's robe shop between the Ministry supporters and the people that believe the new stories out of the reformed Daily Prophet.

I suppress the sudden urge to do the evil overlord cackle and proclaim myself the 'Lord of Chaos'.

I think I will go visit my godson instead until this urge goes away. I need to go corrupt ... err, I mean be a good role model for him anyway.

Hmm, I wonder if Gabby is doing some more yoga?

Part VI – Ghosts of the Past

Now it is the time of night

That the graves, all gaping wide,

Every one lets forth his sprite

In the church-way paths to glide.

William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

22 September 2002 – Tower of London

"Sir Harry, it is good to see you once again."

I bow politely to the ghost of Queen Anne. "Thank you, your Majesty.

The ghost Queen smiles. "And what can We do for you now, sir wizard? Based on the smiles of your royal minions, One suspects you have more mischief in mind."

The Ghost Princes of the Tower bounce excitedly on their insubstantial toes. Prince Edward V was a Second year Slytherin at the time of his death while Prince Richard was waiting on his Hogwarts letter and had his heart set on Gryffindor. They had also been cousins to the Potters of the time. They immediately adopted me on my first visit to the Tower of London and dubbed me 'Sir Harry'.

Cheeky ghosts said I would need the title to get myself out of trouble.

Queen Anne Boleyn ruled the Tower through a combination of rank, charm, and personality. I also get the sense she holds a lot of weight

with the rest of the British ghost community. I know for a fact that the Bloody Baron, Slytherin's House ghost, passed information on to her.

"Yes, your Majesty," I acknowledge. "The Dark Lord that I last fought is now gone. Now I fight a Light Lord that would impose his own standards on the rest of the nation."

"You speak of Albus Dumbledore? Yes, We have heard of his efforts to impose his will on Our magical subjects." The queen pierced me with a stare. "And if you are successful in your efforts, what would you replace his government with?"

I was a bit shocked at that. Frankly, I never thought about who or what would replace Dumbledore and Weasley in power. Tom was gone with most of his Death Munchers. Even the ones that survived were completely discredited by Malfoy's confession letter. With both Riddle and Dumbledore's supporters compromised who would be left?

"I assumed that when they resigned or are forced out a new Minister would be elected. I've never really thought about it," I admit. "I have no interest in political power. I just want to be left alone."

"While that is a laudable position, you, Sir Harry, are responsible for the consequences of your actions." Her stare is worse than McGonagall. "We went to Our execution joyfully in order to keep peace in the kingdom. We never spoke ill of Our husband, the King. Nay, We in fact spoke words of support for his continued reign. This action protected both Our nation and Our family.

"Now, Sir Harry, what shall you do to protect Our subjects from the consequences of your actions?" she challenged. "It is the actions of a child to lash out and then run away from the consequences. Are you ready to stop being a child, Sir Harry?"

Damn, this woman asks some hard questions.

"I don't know who will fill the power void," I answer honestly. "As I said, I have no desire at all to gain political power. Frankly, I would be a disaster in just about any government role." The queen graces this admission with a small smile of agreement.

"I will do my best to prevent my conflict with Dumbledore from negatively impacting the rest of the magical world. After that? I guess it depends on who takes power and if I am even welcome in the country."

The queen nods. "All We can ask is that you do your best, accept all of your responsibilities, and accept the consequences of your actions." Queen Anne now gives me a little grin. "So, tell Us you impudent little man, what mayhem do you plan now?"

"Well, to start with, I need some information."

-HP:HW-

23 September 2002 – near Nuremburg, Germany

The towering jet-black structure rose from the hillside in a daunting display. Having been a guest of the Azkaban Spa and Resort, I know something about grim prisons. This place is just as bad. While it doesn't have Dementors, it has the same air of utter hopelessness. In a morbid display it has the phrase, 'For the Greater Good' carved in German.

The door opens as I approach. I just hope this is worth it.

-HP:AC-

"You wished to see me? I don't get many visitors anymore. Even Albus missed his annual visit this year."

The old man sits on a small cot in his cell at the very top of the prison. It is a fairly large cell, at least four times the size of mine, and it has a small bookshelf filled with what appears to be Muggle novels.

The man himself is clean-shaven but with long, white, curly hair. Most of the hair is pulled back from his face in a loose ponytail. He has a sad, resigned expression but his eyes are full of curiosity and intelligence as he watches me.

"The guards tell me you are a Hit Wizard and wish for my insight in tracking this 'Prank Lord'. But I suspect you are here for a different reason. You must have paid a substantial bribe to get time in here with me alone."

"Not that much," I admit. "The German Ministry owed me a favour. That cut down on the cost."

Gellert Grindelwald chuckles delightedly. "How wonderfully corrupt. It is sad to say but such behaviours always made my work much easier. If I had more wisdom and patience in my youth, I suspect I could have simply bought all the European Ministries rather than try to conquer them."

"They do seem rather susceptible," I agree.

Riddle's predecessor smiles again. "So, what can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

I only nod at his observation. "Tell me about Dumbledore. Almost all of Britain believes he killed you in 1945; that the term 'defeated' is a euphemism for killed. But I want to know the truth."

"Yes, I know," Grindelwald answers. "I am fine with that. I deserved to die for the things I did, the grief I caused."

"I met Albus when I was sixteen and just thrown out of Durmstang. I was impetuous in my youth and challenged a professor to a duel for some slight. I was expelled and decided to travel for a bit before taking my NEWTS independently. I journeyed to my Great-Aunt's house in Godric's Hollow. It was there I met the only person I ever truly loved."

"Albus had just finished Hogwarts and was caring for his magical invalid sister. Ariana was a sweet girl but emotionally unstable. That made her magic unstable and prone to dangerous bouts of accidental magic. Their mother was killed in one such bout and Albus was forced to become his little sister's caretaker."

"Then I came along with my wild-eyed dreams and excitement. Albus and I quickly became inseparable. I believe that going from the heights of academic performance to being a caretaker in a sleepy little village was killing Albus. I was like a sudden lifeline thrown to a drowning man."

My jaw is threatening to drop. When Queen Anne pointed me in this direction, I expected to hear about their conflict, not a boyhood friendship.

"So, you were mates?" I ask.

Grindelwald grins in a way that makes me a little uncomfortable. "Aye, we were mates. But not in the best friends sense if you take my meaning." Okay. Now I am uncomfortable. I didn't know the old man batted for the home team. The old Dark Lord cackles at my expression.

"I always get the 'credit' for coming up with the Greater Good philosophy that I made the centrepiece of my rise to power. Actually, I just took Albus's ideas to a logical extension. He believes that wizards of power have a responsibility to guide those weaker or not magically gifted. An aristocracy of magical talent if you will. All in the name of establishing the Greater Good of the human race, magical and muggle."

"If these were his ideas then why didn't he join you?" I ask curiously.

"That twit brother of his hated me and our relationship. He kept harping on Albus's responsibility to his sister. We got into a three-way fight that ended with poor Ariana dead." The former Dark Lord lowered his head in shame. "We never knew just who's spell killed her."

Grindelwald paused for a moment before adding in a quiet voice, "She always made me the nicest biscuits."

After a moment, the old wizard continued. "After that Albus refused to see me again. He blamed me for the accident. It was guilt that drove Albus to join the fight against me. He blamed our ideas for his sister's death rather than the fact we were three young idiots. I think he believed stopping me would be his absolution for Ariana's death."

Grindelwald looked up again. "Ironically, I believe Albus never changed his personal philosophy. He just dropped the desire for direct control. One look at his career since my defeat would show you that: Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, Headmaster of Hogwarts and Chief Warlock of the British Wizengamot.

"He himself has told me of turning down the position of Minister of Magic. He was proud of it even though I believe you would not have had as significant a difficulty dealing with Voldemort if Albus had taken direct control. But his fear of that kind of direct power because of his guilt prevented him."

Grindelwald gives me a considering look. "He talked about you many times when he has visited me."

"I am almost afraid to ask."

Grindelwald chuckles. "At first it was just after the Prophecy. He saw you as a possible successor. To defeat a Dark Lord you must be incredibly powerful; a natural member of his magical aristocracy if you will. Later it changed when you resisted his efforts to mould you in his image. You became a possible rival. Then he saw you as a weapon to destroy Voldemort and then be neutralized by any means required.

The old Dark Lord gets a sly smile on his face. "He did mention he wanted to have you impregnate several witches before your death to ensure the continuation of the magical bloodline."

Now that annoys me. I like the ladies but I am not ready for any little Potters running around. I say as much to my 'host'.

"Oh, he never planned on you raising them. Or even knowing they existed. There could be a dozen of them running around right now for that matter. Certain potions and you'd be as horny as a satyr and not remember a thing come morning."

Okay, now Dumbledore has to die.

My interview continues for another ninety minutes. While the previous Dark Lord seems sorry for the way he went about gaining power he still believes the ideas were true. While he wasn't the psychopath Tom was, his belief that it was all for a high purpose actually makes it worse in some ways. Tom was a sick psychotic bastard but Grindelwald was a zealot. Where Tom didn't see anything wrong with his actions, Grindelwald was willing to kill innocent people to achieve his goals.

That might be the real difference between Grindelwald and Dumbledore. The Dark Lord did much of his own killing while Dumbledore manipulates others into doing his for him.

I leave Nurmung prison shaken. I can't take anything Grindelwald told me at face value. He is a Dark Lord after all. But it does give me places to start.

-HP:HW-

25 September 2002

A small pack of herbology texts scurry past me as I make my way through Hogwarts headed for the Chamber of Secrets. One of the books pauses a moment to wave before chasing off after its mates.

I bet the little guys are making class time more enjoyable.

I absently cast a couple charms on the suits of armour lining the hall to sing opera or American Country music. Either one would be enough to drive the staff and students crazy, but both together? Cruel and unusual punishment

Myrtle seems to be out haunting the Prefects bath again. I have to wonder how many of the other ghosts are into voyeurism. But I guess it is not like they have a lot else to do with their time.

I open the Chamber and use my Spitfire to fly down. No need to slide down the slimy pipe and I highly doubt Fawkes would be willing to give me a lift out again.

I fly down the passage towards the doors to the Chamber. I transfigure the rock fall into a stone arch to support the ceiling. It might have been an obstacle for a pair of Second years and an incompetent (and obliterated) DADA professor, but a Sixth year would be able to perform this level of magic.

The doors are still open as I fly in. That is when I get my first surprise. The basilisk is gone. As I fly over all that is left is a black patch on the cave floor. No sign of bone or skin. It was just gone. Not sure what I expected but this was not it.

"Surprised, Sir Harry?" a voice asks from just behind me.

I barely restrain myself from pulling my wand as I whip the broom around. When I see who has arrived, I take a calming breath before answering.

"Thank you for meeting me, Lord Baron." Behind him floats the other House ghosts. Nick and the Friar give me genial waves while the Grey Lady of Ravenclaw simply watches me.

The Slytherin ghost gives me a polite half-bow. "Her Majesty has blessed your endeavours and the Ghost Council of Hogwarts honours her wishes." The Baron speaks in a grim, raspy voice. It is the most I've ever heard him say.

"Yes, I am surprised," I answer the Baron's earlier question. "I expected something of the basilisk to survive; at least the bones and skin."

The Grey Lady floats forward and seems to study me for a moment. Then for the first time I've ever heard of she starts to talk in a soft, breathy voice. "Basilisk venom contains enzymes meant to aid in the digestion of the snake's food. It is only the snake's inherent magic that prevents the venom from acting on the snake's flesh. Once slain, the magic faded and the venom ate through the venom sacs located behind the creature's eyes. As large as Salazar's pet had grown, it took over eighteen months for the enzymes to render the remains down to the tar-like substance you see staining the sands."

Yuck. It ate itself.

"You knew about Slytherin's monster?"

The ghost shoots the Baron an undecipherable glance before nodding. "Salazar built protections into his Chamber not just from the living but from the dead as well. We may not speak or otherwise relate any of what we learn within its walls."

"It is why I assumed you wished to meet here," the Baron rasps. "I was most impressed by the cunning."

"I did what I could," Sir Nicholas added. "I slipped in front of that boy when he would have looked the creature straight in the eye." There

is a certain irony that the bloke he is talking about went on to sail away with my former girlfriend on his lap.

"I am sure you did, Sir Nick," I assure the Gryffindor ghost.

"What would you ask of us?" the Baron demanded.

"First I need you to have Peeves do me a little favour. Then we need to ..."

I spend the next two hours explaining to the ghosts what my idea was. I've always had a good relationship with Sir Nick and the Friar so they agreed right away. The Grey Lady never spoke again. She simply gave me a small nod of agreement along with an amused smile. It was the Baron that surprised me the most.

"A cunning plan. Salazar would have been proud to have you amongst his students." A pained expression crossed the Baron's face. "Much has been made of Salazar's split from his foster brother, Godric. Those two apprenticed under the same master and were closer than brothers of the same mother. Their falling out was vicious and exaggerated as family fights often are. My own actions of the time helped solidify the rift. The actions of the last of Salazar's descendents since arriving at this school have now cast the reputation of my House in steel."

The Baron turns his baleful eyes on me. "Your actions of three years ago cleaned out the worst of those within my own House that bought into that reputation. Now you move to expose the 'Light Lord' of Godric's House that used that reputation to his own ends.

"You shall have my assistance, young wizard. But I want a pledge from you in turn. Restore Slytherin House to its proper place; the home to ambition, the push to achieve great things – not shallow arrogance. Without Salazar's ambition to dream, Godric's bravery to try the unthinkable, Rowena's brilliance, and Helga's drive, this school would never have come into existence. The balance must be restored. That shall be your responsibility." The Grey Lady gives the Baron a grim look before nodding. Sir Nick and the Friar seem to be in agreement as well.

What is it with ghosts giving me lectures on responsibility and the need to grow-up? First the Queen and now the Hogwarts' ghosts.

There seems to be a conspiracy in place. I feel a sudden chill as a thought occurs to me.

I wonder, can ghosts communicate with the dead? Cause after witnessing Molly Weasley and even Petunia Dursley in action with their sons, I can almost feel my mother behind this.

Part VII - Revelations

"Villainy wears many masks, none more dangerous than the mask of virtue"

Ichabod Crane (Johnny Depp) in the film, Sleepy Hollow (1999)

30 September 2002 - Hogwarts

A lot of work has gone into this moment.

The Great Hall is silent as I sit comfortably in Dumbledore's throne-like chair. Doesn't anyone else find it troubling that the Headmaster of a school sits on a raised dais to a large wooden chair with a tall ornate back surrounded by much smaller but similar chairs for the rest of the staff? Am I the only one to wonder why?

Ah, speak of the Devil; my guest of honour has arrived.

Dumbledore strides into the Hall with that weird air of majestic wizard combined with dotty, old grandfather. His purple robe with moving shooting stars is enough to give a bloke a migraine. He is about three steps into the Hall when he notices something is very wrong here. He quickly spots me lounging in his chair.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Potter?" he demands.

"Oh, lighten up, Albus. We just haven't had a chat in such a long time that I just felt the need to stop by and visit my old school. It really hasn't changed a bit." I pause to consider the action going on at the foot of the staff table. "Well, except for the books developing something of an attitude."

The Headmaster glares at the little struggle between a lone Dark Arts book against a pack of DADA texts for a moment before turning his glare back to me. I notice he now has his wand in his hand.

"We have had enough of your foolish interruptions and childishness, Mr. Potter. You will remain right there while I summon the Aurors. They will have you back into your cell within the hour."

"Oh, I intend to stay right here, Albus," I assure the old man. "I have a lot of questions for you. If you want an additional audience that is your call."

Dumbledore scowls at me. "I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Potter, and I have no need to answer your questions. Now, surrender your wand."

I shrug. "Tell me, Albus, what will the public do when they learn you are illegally a member of the Wizengamot?"

He huffs indignantly. "I have been the Chief Warlock for over twenty years and a member for ten years before that! There is nothing illegal about my membership."

"Do you remember that law you and your pet Minister passed- the one where anyone with a convicted felon in their family was barred from membership?" A small tick seems to have developed on Albus's left eye.

"That doesn't apply to me. My only family member is my brother. While he may have a few minor charges against him, there is nothing that reaches that level."

"Aberforth is your only living family member," I agree. "But I was actually referring to your father. You know, the guy sent to Azkaban for twenty years for an attack on Muggles in retribution for their assault on your younger sister?"

Dumbledore looks furious now. "You will leave her out of this."

I wave nonchalantly. "Oh, I intend to. I actually have a lot of sympathy for her. She was a complete innocent and definitely didn't deserve the load of crap life gave her. Kind of like me after Tom visited and you got your hands on me."

Dumbledore conjures a chair that mirrors the one I am sitting in. As he settles himself down, he says, "You were tried and convicted,

Harry. You murdered three Hogwarts students in cold blood. Even you don't deny that."

"Just like your father was," I agree. "However we both know the circumstances in both situations were not so cut and dry. Percival Dumbledore wanted revenge for the assault on his only daughter while I, ironically, was trying to stop someone with the mission of killing your sorry arse. As if leaving me with the Dursley's to be starved and beaten wasn't enough, you reward my loyalty by throwing me in with the creatures able to torture me even more. All so I could clean up your mess for you.'

"It was all for the Greater Good, Harry. Your experiences with your family gave you the determination and strength to fight off Tom. Without that hardening you would have not been able to stand up to his mental assault. The knowledge and skills learnt via your link to Tom were required to bridge the sixty year experience gap."

I have to admit, I could easily cast any of the Unforgivables right now. He saw growing up in 'Durs-kaban' as conditioning? It is only the Occlumency I learnt via Tom that keeps me from killing the bastard where he stands.

I set my anger to the side for the moment. I have to remember the plan.

"Cut the bullshit, Albus. Do you see anyone else here?" I gesture around the empty Great Hall. "Just tell the truth – if you are able to that is. Admit it; your father was a convicted felon."

"However did you learn of that, my boy?" Genial Dumbledore was back. I wonder if the old bastard is bi-polar or has multiple personalities. "I made sure all of the records were destroyed long ago and I forced Aberforth to a vow of silence."

"Contrary to popular belief, I am not complete rubbish at research. You missed a couple sources during your cover-up." I grin at Dumbledore's disbelieving look. "What? You thought I spent all my time planning pranks?"

"Very well, Harry. If it makes you feel better. Yes, my father was sent to prison for attacking the animals that assaulted his six year old little girl to the point she was never able to use her magic."

I shrug nonchalantly now. "Oh, I understand why he did that. I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing in his shoes. I was just remarking on how you just admitted to breaking the very law you've been using to remove Dark families and political opponents from the Wizengamot."

I smile mischievously and wag my finger at 'the most powerful wizard in the world'. "Naughty, naughty, Headmaster."

Dumbledore merely smiles back smugly and says, "I suppose it was rather naughty, wasn't it."

"Now since you mentioned my crime, do you remember Michael Tiller? No? He was a wizard during Tom's first war that encountered two men in Diagon Alley late one night. Suspecting something, he followed them. When they noticed him, they started firing Dark curses. He responded and killed both of his attackers. It turned out the two men were marked Death Eaters. You recommended him for an Order of Merlin – Second Class."

Dumbledore gives his patented 'disappointed grandfather sigh'. "That was a different time, Harry, with different circumstances."

"You mean, you needed Tiller as a poster boy while me you wanted in Azkaban for my connection to Tom. You figured if Snape could open the connection wide enough for me to catch glimpses into Tom's head what would the Dementors do to me."

Dumbledore claps softly with a look of delight on his face. "You were always a gifted student, Harry. If only you hadn't been so reluctant to be guided by me you would have made an excellent apprentice to me. Such a pity."

"Now, since I answered one of your questions, Harry, why don't you answer one of mine? How were you able to escape from the ICW prison colony?"

"I was never there," I admit with a shrug. "Scrimgeour never trusted you and gave me an out. I spent the last few years seeing the world. His last act before you tossed him out of office was to release me from that contract you forced on me. He also gave me a pardon. I am free as a bird." That last bit is a lie but he doesn't know that.

Wow, he looks a bit pissed at that revelation as his eyes flash for an instant. Then the mask is back.

"My turn! What is the deal with using Percy and Hermione to run the Ministry for you? Why not take control directly?"

Dumbledore smiles. "Why should I want that kind of pressure? The Weasleys make excellent tools for all the day-to-day Ministry dealings but follow my directions much better than the previous Ministers."

"So they are simply your tools? That is good to know."

"No," Dumbledore disagrees. "I have merely convinced them to the wisdom of my position. They follow me of their own accord. Much like the rest of the Weasley family follows you."

I acknowledge the point with a nod. Honestly, I don't think anyone has ever forced Hermione into doing something she was completely opposed to.

"Maybe," I allow. "But you were definitely able to lead them to the well."

Albus chuckles at the comment. "Indeed. The former Ms. Granger had to be led most gently at the beginning. Her ambition to prove Muggleborns as good as Purebloods coupled with her fears of the danger you were in made it possible."

The Headmaster must have caught something on my face as he smiles. "Hermione loved you as her big brother and protector. Hearing my own 'fears' of you going astray was enough to get her to follow my directions. Of course, Ms. Granger always had an almost pathological need to please authority figures. A trait she shares most strongly with her husband."

Dumbledore leans forward in his chair. "You must understand, Harry. This is all for the Greater Good of magical folk everywhere. Eventually, the ICW will expand to directly control the worldwide magical community. Once control is consolidated we can reveal ourselves to our opposite numbers in the United Nations.

"Think of it, Harry! A world at peace made possible through the application of magic!" Dumbledore looks really excited about this. "The Muggles have problems with pollution, crime, and famine. With our help the entire human race can benefit."

"And what about the individual in all this, Albus?"

The old man shrugs it off. "The whole is more important than any one man, or ten or even a hundred. People with our power have a responsibility to use it to improve the world as a whole, not for their own aggrandizement of wealth or power."

"Where do you draw that line?" I ask curiously. "If 100 is acceptable, what about a 1,000 or 10,000? Would you sacrifice the magical population of Britain if it brought about this Greater Good of yours?"

"It would not come to that, my boy," Dumbledore assures me. "People can be reasonable once they are shown the right way to go."

"Then why not tell them now what you are really planning to do?" I challenge.

"They are not ready," he answers simply. "Tom's actions have left them much too scarred to understand what is in their own best interest. That is why it is up to the leaders to show them the way."

"Now, I had Binns for History of Magic, but isn't that what Grindelwald wanted to do too?"

"Gellert sought to use the path of violence to get his way. While his goals were laudable, he took a Dark path in his approach," I am told condescendingly.

Dumbledore's smile shifts a bit. "And now Harry, our conversation must end. The Aurors shall be arriving soon and as enjoyable as our discussion has been, I cannot allow you to share your knowledge with them."

"One last question, Albus."

"Very well, Harry," the old wizard concedes as he rises with his wand from the chair.

"Did you ever go through with the plan to use lust potions to breed a new generation of Potters?"

Dumbledore goes white in shock. I can see his mind racing as he pulls the pieces together. "Of course," he gasps, "you've been talking to Gellert. Only he could tell you all of this." He pauses for a couple of heartbeats before continuing.

"Very well, I shall obviously have to deal with my old friend once you are no longer an issue, Mr. Potter."

"I want an answer, you old bastard. Did you give me lust potions to use me as a stud?"

Dumbledore smiles with that damn eye twinkle. "It doesn't really matter, Harry. You won't remember this in a minute anyway."

I feel an evil smile cross my face. "Do you remember why you put me in Azkaban? You wanted to use my link to Tom so I could absorb all his knowledge." I pause a second while I see Dumbledore wondering where I am going with this. "He spent a fair amount of time in South America. Did you know the Incans were accomplished illusionists?"

Before Dumbledore can respond, I drop the illusion. Suddenly the Hall is filled with students at every House table. Against the wall to my right is the assembled Hogwarts staff escorted by the entire true Weasley family and Aberforth Dumbledore. On my left stand the other Weasleys, Percy and Hermione under the eyes of my fellow Hit Wizards. I can see the fury on both of their faces as they glare at Dumbledore.

Funny, those are the same glares I was getting an hour ago when Ian, Jason and Lurch dragged them in here.

Dumbledore looks ready to explode.

"Oops, did I forget to mention that we were not alone? Shame on me. So, Professor, think you can Oblivate all of us?"

"Albus, how could you?" The question comes from a furious looking Professor McGonagall. Wow, does she ever look brassed off.

The old man draws in his dignity and releases his aura. A feeling of pure power suddenly fills the Hall. "I only did what I had to do- for the good of all Wizardingkind."

Auras have no practical purpose except to show off your magical strength. It is kind of like the Wizarding version of a Muggle bodybuilder flexing his biceps except it is also like showing the cards in your hand before the bets are placed. Your magic gives you an indication of your relative power. So a wizard as powerful as Albus or Tom, who are an order of magnitude or two more powerful than the average witch or wizard, can easily intimidate a room full of people.

I am now out of my seat and moving around the staff table. My wand in my hand, I let loose my own aura to match Albus's.

"No Albus. You acted to bring about the dreams you and your lover shared all those years ago. My parents, Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and countless others have been sacrificed to that dream. Hell, even Tom was probably a pawn in your scheme. Here's a hint Albus, if you can't discuss your great plan for society in public it is probably immoral, illegal, Dark, or all of the above."

"Damn you, Potter. If you had only played the role you were intended I could have brought the world into a Utopia!" Dumbledore seethes as he realized the wheels had just come off all his plans.

I smirk. "Well, I did lead a group of kids and even had a meddling dog." Dumbledore misses the reference although I can hear snickers from some of the students. I raise my wand. "This ends now, Dumbledore. Surrender your wand."

For a moment, the dotty old Headmaster returns. "Sorry, Harry my boy. I am afraid I am unable to do as you request. While I am a bit old to start over again, I am sure I can find an acceptable situation somewhere else." The old man smiles with the 'Twinkle of Doom' in full effect. "But before I go I am afraid you will have to be prevented from further damaging my plans."

Even as Dumbledore casts his first spell, we are both instantly transported out of the Great Hall and into the field near the

Hogwart's Quidditch pitch. I deflect the spell with an advanced shield charm as Dumbledore moves into a full on assault.

The fight is on.

Neither of us bothers with worded magic. The fight is filled with the sounds of explosions, cracks and grunts but no shouted words.

The field is alive with magical energy; beams of light dig out furrows on the ground while conjured animals and objects lay shattered about us. I will say this for the old man: he puts up on hell of a fight. But we've been fighting for ten minutes already and I can feel his magic weakening and his reactions slowing.

I dodge an ugly purple hex with a dive to my left. As I come up I summon Dumbledore's shoes. The invisible spell yanks the Headmaster's feet out from under him and he lands hard on his back. The shoes fly past me an instant later.

I conjure a baseball bat and sprint to where the Headmaster is struggling to regain his feet. "Fore!"

Okay, it was the wrong sport but work with me here.

The wood smacks into Dumbledore's ribs just below his right armpit. The old Headmaster lets out an anguished scream. The bat's back swing collides with the wizard's head with a resounding whack. Dumbledore drops bonelessly to the ground without even a whimper.

I can barely believe it is over. So long, so much pain and now it is over like that? It is almost anti-climatic. Although a glance around is enough to tell me it is a damn good thing we somehow ended up outside the school or the Great Hall would have been the Great Hole..

I toss the bat away before I reach down to take the old man's wand. The Ministry put Tom's wand in a museum display. I think I will keep this one. As I move Dumbledore's hand I notice something from Tom's memories. It is Slytherin's ring. Well, it looks like I will get a trophy from Tommy after all. I slide the ring on as I stand up again with both wands in my hands.

Oddly enough, my dad's old invisibility cloak that is under my regular robes suddenly feels rather warm. Guess I worked up more of a sweat than I expected.

I suddenly notice the loud cheering that is coming from up towards the castle. Just outside the castle I can see the entire Hogwarts student body and probably everyone else that was in the Great Hall. A little closer down is a much smaller group of glowing white figures.

I absently cast a Hit Wizard binding charm on the unconscious wizard. He has a probable concussion and broken ribs in addition to no wand, but I'm not arrogant enough to take stupid chances.

The ghosts drift down the small hill to join me. At their front I see Queen Anne along with the two princes. Those two seem to be skipping happily along to the apparent amusement of the adult ghosts. I recognize the House ghosts along with just about all the other Hogwarts ghosts. Even Peeves seems to behave with them.

"That was most excellent, Sir Harry!" the ghost of Prince Edward calls to me in an excited tone. "I wish something like that happened when I was a student here!" His brother Richard nods his agreement.

"Thank you, my princes," I accept with a polite nod. I look up to the Queen and her 'court'. "And I would like to thank all of you for making this possible. Without your intercession with Hogwarts I would never have been able to do this today."

"It was all well-done, Sir Harry," Queen Anne says. "You have lived up to your promise and revealed to all the perfidy of Albus Dumbledore. But now you must live up to the commitments and responsibility you have assumed."

Her comment puzzles me a bit. But I simply respond with, "Yes, your Majesty." The little smirk on her lips worries me a bit but I am too overwhelmed to really think about it.

"In reward for your actions, Sir Harry, we have a few here that would like to greet you." The Queen steps to the side along with the rest of the Hogwarts ghosts. Behind her stands another group.

The first ones I recognized at Remus, Sirius and Tonks- then Mr. and Mrs. Weasley along with Bill. But then two more figures step

forward and I have to force myself to breath to keep from passing out.

My parents.

"Damn Harry, you sure made a mess of the place!" James Potter says proudly. "Mr. Prongs is proud of the next generation of Marauders."

"Mr. Moony agrees!"

"Mr. Padfoot too!"

"James, hush," Lily Potter admonishes her husband. She steps up to me with a gentle smile. I can't move a muscle as she rubs her ghostly hand against my cheek. All I can feel is a slight chill.

"My baby boy all grown up and making me so proud. You've had such a hard road but I know you are going to be okay now. I am so proud of all you've accomplished." One eyebrow goes up and her eyes harden for an instant. "Although we are going to have a discussion sometime soon about the tramps you have been entertaining yourself with."

"Mum?" I wimper. I feel like my mind is about to snap. Come on. I live my whole life as an orphan, defeat a Dark Lord and a Light Lord and now my mother wants to discuss my choice in women? Coherent thoughts are just not happing at this point.

"Ease up, Lils. The poor kid looks ready to faint." Thanks Dad. I see that smirk.

Mum whacks him lightly on the chest. "Harry, we don't have much time. We just wanted to see you and get a chance to say how proud we all are of you."

The other ghosts come closer to add their sentiments. Sirius congratulates me on taking care of Bellatrix and Snape. Remus and Tonks look happy as they remind me to look out for Teddy and thank everyone for taking care of their son. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley pass on messages for their children while Bill wants me to pass on his approval to Charlie and Fleur along with a couple choice comments I won't mention here.

Then my mother steps forward again. "We have to go now, Harry. We might be able to visit you again but remember how proud we are of you."

"And get us some good-looking grandchildren!" Dad adds.

"How can I see you again?" I stammer.

"You'll figure it out," Remus answers with a grin.

"I don't know, Moony," Sirius disagrees. "He never struck me as being that quick."

"Sirius Black!" Mum warns.

"Um, bye Harry!"

They start to fade as Dad gives me a mischievous wink. If I am bad now what would I have been like with those knuckleheads raising me?

With the ghosts gone, I look up the hill while the living spectators suddenly move forward in celebration.

Part VIII – Epilogue

15 April 2003 – BVI

The sun is just setting over the islands as I arrive with a soft pop near my house. It feels good to be home.

The last six months have been a zoo. Dumbledore's 'confession' in front of the staff and student body of Hogwarts, plus the Minister and his Senior Undersecretary were more than enough to put the nails into the old bastard's coffin. He was quickly kicked out of all of his offices, permanently this time, before being put on trial.

The trial brought out all kinds of skeletons and underhanded deals. For example it turns out Dumbledore had been Tom's magical guardian throughout his time at school. Dumbledore believed that leaving Tom in the orphanage would enhance Tom's understanding of Muggles while preventing him from aligning too much with the

Pureblood society. Then Tom would make an excellent apprentice to assist Albus in his goals. This all came out from memories stored in Dumbledore's Pensieve.

One item that was missing was no one knew if Dumbledore had ever followed through with his potions plan for a new generation of Potters. None of my former classmates had unexplained pregnancies and no one came forward. The old bastard wouldn't say and Wizarding law prevented the forced use of Veritaserum except in capital cases.

Shakespeare was right. Kill all the lawyers.

In the end, Dumbledore's accumulated charges earned him fifty years in Azkaban. As a favour to me, the British Ministry requested the German Ministry allowed Dumbledore to be housed in the cell across from his old lover, confidant, and best mate, Gellert Grindelwald.

I make no admission to knowing how Grindelwald was able to get a hold of a Muggle paintball gun or an ever full box of paintball ammunition and CO2 cartridges.

Percy and Hermione resigned in disgrace just before the Wizengamot could vote them out. Dumbledore's admission that they were manipulated into being his willing dupes kept them out of Azkaban but no one was willing to let them stay in power. It was a bit hypocritical how all of Dumbledore's former supporters turned on them but what did you expect? They're politicians.

Last I heard Hermione put out her shingle as a solicitor for various underdog causes. It is nice to see something of the girl that I used to know still remains. Just so you know, I did eventually release the voodoo curse contained by the doll within the troll plushy- about fifteen minutes after she'd resigned.

As for Percy – well, do you really care? I did hear something about him taking a position with Molly's second cousin in a Muggle accounting firm, but I don't care enough to really confirm it.

After the lecture from Queen Anne I stayed around to help things settle down after Dumbledore was thrown into prison. (I never did

get to ask Mum if she was behind it.) I cancelled most of my pranks and life in Britain returned to something like normal.

Okay, the books are still running wild. They make me laugh.

With my support, Madam Bones is now the Minister of Magic. Charlie accepted an appointment to run the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. With him as a Pureblood but married to a half-Veela and having custody of the son of a well-known werewolf made both sides of the divide happy. The 'normal' witches and wizards were convinced he wouldn't give away the store while the 'Dark' or regulated creatures felt he had some empathy for their positions.

We decided that Teddy would remain with Charlie and Fleur to attend school but get long visits to me. They can give him a more stable environment and I just can't stay in England. Too many people want to use me or my fame for their own ends. Besides, the life of a Hit Wizard is not something to include a little boy in.

The true identity of Tom Jerry Aspheart is not something known outside a small group of people. The Wealey family, the upper ranks of the independent Hit Wizards, the Unspeakables and Madam Bones. (Although based on a comment from Croaker, the American MIB at least has a clue, Others too maybe.) Catching Dark witches and wizards is what I am best at.

To my surprise, my front door opens as I approach. Standing in the doorway is a provocatively dressed Gabrielle Delacour. With a bikini top and a gauzy wrap-around skirt that reveals nothing but hints at everything, she is definitely the hottest thing I've ever seen on two legs. She is definitely worthy of the angelic visions of her namesake.

"Hello, Harry."

"Hello. What are you doing here, Gabrielle?"

She gives me that innocent but dangerous look again as she slowly approaches me. "Well, I realized I've never properly thanked you for saving me during the Second Task. I think it is time I correct that oversight."

"Er, you don't have to do that. You're family."

Gabrielle places her arms over my shoulders. In a soft voice she says, "Shut up, Harry."

Well, folks, something just came up so you will have to excuse me for leaving you here. I'll just say I plan on living happily ever after.